Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro

Literary Conversations Series
Peggy Whitman Prenshaw
General Editor



Kazuo Ishiguro, photography by Eamonn McCabe

Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro

Edited by
Brian W. Shaffer and Cynthia F. Wong

University Press of Mississippi
Jackson

Books by Kazuo Ishiguro

A Pale View of Hills. London: Faber and Faber; New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1982.
An Artist of the Floating World. London: Faber and Faber; New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1986.
The Remains of the Day. London: Faber and Faber; New York: Knopf, 1989.
The Unconsoled. London: Faber and Faber; New York: Knopf, 1995.
When We Were Orphans. London: Faber and Faber; New York: Knopf, 2000.
Never Let Me Go. London: Faber and Faber; New York: Knopf, 2005.

www.upress.state.ms.us

The University Press of Mississippi is a member of the Association of American University Presses.

Manufactured in the United States of America

First edition 2008
∞
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ishiguro, Kazuo, 1954–
Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro / edited by Brian W. Shaffer and Cynthia F. Wong.
p. cm. — (Literary conversations series)
Includes index.
ISBN-13: 978-1-934110-61-4 (alk. paper)
ISBN-10: 1-934110-61-2 (alk. paper)
ISBN-13: 978-1-934110-62-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)
ISBN-10: 1-934110-62-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Ishiguro, Kazuo, 1954– —Interviews. 2. Novelists, English—20th century—Interviews. I. Shaffer, Brian W., 1960– II. Wong, Cynthia F. III. Title.
PR6059.S5Z46 2008
823'.914—dc22 2007029084

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

Contents

Introduction

Early in his writing career Kazuo Ishiguro was repeatedly asked by interviewers to relate his Japanese "name and face" to the subjects and concerns of his books. Did the Japanese setting of the first two novels originate in his memory of a distant homeland? How could a person with an Anglo-Japanese heritage such as his write a novel about a butler who was "more English" than even the English could conceive? To each variation of such questions about his identity and nationality in relation to his fiction, Ishiguro responded with what Allan Vorda calls the author's "typical leashed irony."

No, Ishiguro would reply, he does not speak or write Japanese, let alone see himself as working within any Japanese literary or cultural tradition. Indeed, he was advised in 1991 during a visit to Japan to stick to English, lest he should make some offending remark based on his ignorance of Japanese language and culture. He would then explain that while his parents provided him with Japanese textbooks and other artifacts of his homeland, he knew by the time he was a teenager that he would be staying in England for good, and that Japan would remain for him something of an imagined homeland rather than one rooted in any personal experience. "I realized that this Japan that existed in my head, and which was very important to me, was a country that no longer existed in reality, if it ever had," he tells one interviewer.

And no, we learn in these interviews, Ishiguro did not set out to become a novelist, much less one who would intrigue a world of readers with his carefully crafted fictions of human memory, suffering, and endurance. We learn that he initially aspired to become a rock star—that he wrote songs and played some of these on his guitar in the Paris Metro underground station—and that he was a social worker with the homeless before enrolling in a postgraduate program in creative writing at the University of East Anglia; he chose this program because it sounded easier to complete than one in literature. "[I]t looked like less work," he tells Dylan Otto Krider, because "you handed in a piece of

fiction rather than a scholarly thesis at the end of the year." He recalls writing and arduously rewriting short stories in those classes in a "mild panic" and with a dread of being exposed as a writing fraud by his classmates. He tells us that most of what he drafted in those classes eventually became his first published novel, *A Pale View of Hills*; and he recalls the fateful moment he began to rewrite the work's narrative voice in one spoken by an elderly Japanese widow as a major turning point in his nascent literary career. He credits teachers Angela Carter and Malcolm Bradbury for inspiring him in the early years.

In more recent interviews Ishiguro comments frequently on the demands of promoting his novels following their publication. Book tours that span the English-speaking world, requiring hundreds of readings and interviews, eat up months at a time. Some interviewers try to corner Ishiguro into confessing to a parallel between the author's life and those of his repressed characters. Surely the author, like so many of his protagonists, has something to hide. Surely he is at least a bit like Stevens in *The Remains of the Day*, here and there avoiding a direct answer to some sensitive question. Or like *The Unconsoled*'s Ryder, who manages his fame through deliberate isolation and purposeful deception (years of book tours and readings surely presented the character of Ryder to Ishiguro's imagination). The author's relationship to his characters and subjects evolved in time, as he explained to Christopher Bigsby: "I do feel I am essentially someone who writes very much about my generation and the world around me, that is to say, the West in the 1970s and 1980s, rather than someone who tries to recreate historical periods. . . . I am drawn to periods in history where moral values in society have undergone a sudden change because a lot of the things I am interested in tend to find a cutting edge in those situations. I am interested in how people who tried to do something good and useful in their lives suddenly find that they have misplaced their efforts." Without indicating whether such concerns have a specific autobiographical reference, Ishiguro nevertheless sheds light on the nature of his writing: "I suppose I write out of a sort of fear of what might happen to me rather than what has happened to me" and "I feel I am a part of that generation for whom making something good out of your life, morally good, was a very conscious thing."

In an amusing moment in which "life imitates art," Peter Oliva catches fifteen minutes with Ishiguro in an elevator, between the author's other pressing engagements, and snatches insights about his craft, in a situation straight out of *The Unconsoled*. Ishiguro notes of this parallel, "[*The Unconsoled*] is supposed to be a metaphor for the way most of us have lives that we blunder through, pretending we know where we're going but not really knowing where we're going." As with Ryder, fame has indeed caught up with Ishiguro, but at no point in these interviews does it blunt his wit or dull his engaging conversational style. For all of this media attention, Ishiguro is an unfailingly lucid, patient, and polite interview subject.

For those interested in the writer's craft and in the genesis of his fiction, Ishiguro in this volume sheds much light on the process of his writing. He reveals his admiration for Anton Chekhov, whose spare and precise style is an inspiration, as well as for Fyodor Dostoyevsky, whose sprawling but controlled writing—at once "messy and jagged and brilliantly imperfect" — stimulates his more daring literary experiments. Ishiguro observes that the actual writing of his novels represents a comparatively abbreviated period of time, even though he only publishes a novel every five years or so. Much of the rest of the time is taken up with research, with mapping out the narrative, and with auditioning the different voices of his invented characters. Ishiguro likes to know exactly where he is going in his novels before he actually starts drafting; he is in this sense a very deliberate—even fastidious—craftsman. As he tells Graham Swift, "I'm a very cautious writer. . . . I can't do the business of shoving a blank piece of paper in the typewriter and having a brain-storming session to see what comes out. I have to have a very clear map next to me."

Ishiguro confesses in these interviews to deriving precious little pleasure during the composition of his novels (he cannot, for instance, recall a single day during the writing of his second novel that was enjoyable), and tells one interviewer, "Obviously there are times when a certain kind of satisfaction comes over you, but I don't remember enjoying the procedure of writing at any point. That is always a bit of a slog." This is not to suggest that Ishiguro is not satisfied with the finished products. In his first three novels, which he deems "three attempts to cover the same territory," Ishiguro creates aging characters that look back on their lives with a poignant combination of regret, nostalgia, and courage. As a young writer in his twenties, such characters may have been out of his empirical reach, but Ishiguro manages to convey their stories in a convincing and moving voice. That he manages to have his first-person protagonists tell more than they can say in these early novels is a testament to his native literary gifts and fellow feeling.

Ishiguro has garnered the admiration of many noted novelists; it would be fair to label him a "writer's writer." Salman Rushdie, the author whom Ishiguro credits for opening up English fiction to non-ethnically British writers, praises

his handling of traditional literary themes in a new way; Margaret Atwood finds *Never Let Me Go* to be representative of Ishiguro's thoughtful and subtle portrayals of disquieting subjects; and Anita Brookner, Pico Iyer, and Graham Swift have also sung his praises. Ishiguro is equally generous with his praise of other contemporary novelists. He expresses amazement and humility when an interviewer groups him with the likes of Rushdie, Timothy Mo, Julian Barnes, and Ian McEwan, even though, like most post-romantic creative writers, he resists being grouped together with any particular set of artists.

The interviews also illuminate Ishiguro's various relationships with different segments of his reading public, from the casual reader of his fiction, to the literary reviewer of a major newspaper or journal, to the academic critic. We learn that he is attentive to critical observations made about his work; these broaden his understanding of what he is actually achieving and of whether or not his conscious efforts have been realized. In the early years, for example, he was made aware of an accomplishment in his writing—the spare and temperate voice of his narrators—that he had not even consciously attempted. And gauging the great variety of his readership has helped him steer clear of merely local or arbitrary themes and concerns. For instance, he imagines how a Norwegian reader might respond to a peculiarly English phrase or personality quirk were it to appear, in translation, in one of his novels. Such awareness of cultural differences and expectations, Ishiguro maintains, has made him a more thoughtful critic of his own work and has improved his finished products.

Ishiguro in his interviews restrains his disappointment over the mixed reception of his most experimental work, his fourth novel, *The Unconsoled*, which possesses a Kafkaesque dreamscape instead of the comparatively realistic landscapes of his first three novels. It turns out that many admirers of Ishiguro expected him to write the same sort of finely chiseled, "Jamesian" book that jettisoned his career. Yet this is precisely the book that Ishiguro, at that time, wished to avoid writing. As he aged, he tells Maya Jaggi, he wanted to write "something that would reflect the uncertainty and chaos I started to feel." Nevertheless, some readers maintain that the more absurdist elements of *The Unconsoled* were "redeemed" by Ishiguro's "return" to the more superficially realistic situations in his fifth novel, *When We Were Orphans*, which also is about a deluded but sympathetic character, Christopher Banks, who spends his life searching for—and hoping to be reunited with—his missing parents. In the light of this argument, one

wonders what to make of the trajectory of Ishiguro's narrative art with his very realistic—perhaps even surrealistic or hyperrealistic—yet also futuristic sixth novel, *Never Let Me Go*, in which children are cloned and raised to be organ donors to lengthen the lives of their human sponsors.

Ishiguro's novels defy easy categorization. While there are strong family resemblances among them—most notably the first three, which form a trilogy of aging protagonists reflecting upon disappointing pasts and disillusioned presents—each is also highly idiosyncratic and innovative. What unites them all is the author's explorations of real or imagined historical crises—the post-bomb Nagasaki of *A Pale View of Hills*, the war-torn, besieged Shanghai of the 1930s of *When We Were Orphans*, the parallel universe of genetic engineering in contemporary England of *Never Let Me Go*—as a means of plumbing the depths and shallows of his protagonists' anguished interior landscapes. Although Ishiguro's novels are arguably more overtly concerned with emotional and psychological matters than with historical ones, it is certainly no accident that he sets all of his novels, as Margaret Atwood maintains, "against tenebrous historical backdrops."

The interviews collected here chart Kazuo Ishiguro's evolving self-reflections and artistic and intellectual concerns. We have sought to collect interviews that represent all manners of this diverse genre: the author engaged in casual conversation as well as in more intensely and systematically philosophical dialogues with people from many corners of the globe whose affiliations range from print journalism and radio to academic institutions. Some of these interviews are short and of a general nature, while others are longer and aim to sustain a particular discussion in an exhaustive fashion. Because of the preponderance of interviews Ishiguro gives during each book tour with the inevitable repetition of certain utterances, we have selected ones which best represent concisely the evolution of his artistic sensibilities. Each interview here illuminates an important aspect of the author's career that now spans more than a quarter century.

In keeping with the format of the Literary Conversations Series, the interviews in this volume are reprinted as they first appeared and are presented in chronological order according to when they were first conducted. We have omitted introductory remarks concerning biography that appear in the original interviews, as these are replicated elsewhere and can be found here in the Chronology.

We would like to thank Kazuo Ishiguro for more than a dozen years (and counting) of cherished acquaintanceship and inspiration; Seetha Srinivasan, Walter Biggins, and Shane Gong of the University Press of Mississippi for guidance in developing this volume; and Valerie Jones for preparing the index.

BWS would like to thank members of the English Department at Rhodes College, and particularly Jennifer Brady, for encouragement and support; and Rachel, Hannah, and Ruth for making everything possible and worthwhile. He gratefully acknowledges the generous monetary support provided by the Charles R. Glover Professorship and wishes to dedicate his work on this volume to the memory of his late colleague and friend, Cynthia Marshall.

CFW would like to thank the Department of English at the University of Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center for monies to travel twice to England to meet with Ishiguro; and to Grace A. Crummett for her enduring inspiration.

BWS
CFW

Chronology

1954 Born on 8 November in Nagasaki, Japan. Son of Shizuo and Shizuko Ishiguro.

1960 Ishiguro family moves to Guildford, Surrey; Shizuo, a research oceanographer, accepts a job with the British government.

1960–66 Attends Stoughton Primary School, in Guildford.

1966–73 Attends Woking County Grammar School.

1973–74 Completes schooling; grouse-beater for Queen Mother at Balmoral Castle; hitchhikes in North America.

1974–78 Attends University of Kent in Canterbury, where he earns his BA in English and Philosophy.

1975–76 Suspends studies; begins writing fiction; works as a community worker in Glasgow area housing estate.

1979 Works with the homeless at a resettlement center in London. Meets his future wife, Lorna Anne MacDougall.

1979–80 Attends creative writing program at the University of East Anglia, completing an MA. Studies with Angela Carter and Malcolm Bradbury.

1980–81 Publishes first short story and moves to Cardiff, Wales. Commissioned to write a novel. Publishes three short stories in Faber anthology: *Introductions 7: Stories by New Writers*. Moves to London with Lorna, summer 1981.

1981–82 Works with the homeless in London.

1982 *A Pale View of Hills* (winner of the Winifred Holtby Prize of the Royal Society of Literature). Selected as part of Twenty Best of Young British Novelists national promotion. Turns to writing full-time. Becomes a British citizen.

1984 Channel 4 TV-drama, *A Profile of Arthur J. Mason* (screenwriter), aired.

1986	*An Artist of the Floating World* (winner of the Whitbread Book of the Year Award and shortlisted for the Booker Prize). Marries Lorna Anne MacDougall. Channel 4 TV-drama, *The Gourmet* (screenwriter), aired. Travels in East Asia.
1989	*The Remains of the Day* (winner of the Booker Prize). Visits Japan for the first time in nearly three decades.
1990	Awarded honorary doctorate by the University of Kent, Canterbury.
1992	Birth of daughter Naomi.
1993	Feature film of *The Remains of the Day* (Merchant-Ivory Productions) receives eight Academy Award nominations.
1994	Jury member at Cannes Film Festival.
1995	*The Unconsoled* (winner of the Cheltenham Prize). Awarded honorary doctorate by the University of East Anglia. Awarded the Italian Premio Scanno for Literature. Receives the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for services to literature.
1998	Receives the French Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. Awarded the Italian Premio Mantova.
2000	*When We Were Orphans* (shortlisted for the Booker Prize).
2003	*The Saddest Music in the World* (feature film original screenplay). Awarded honorary doctorate by the University of St. Andrews.
2005	*Never Let Me Go* (winner of the Italian Serono Prize and the German Corine International Book Prize; shortlisted for the Booker Prize). *The White Countess* (feature film original screenplay), Merchant-Ivory Productions.

Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro

An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro

Gregory Mason / 1986

From *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 30, no. 3 (Autumn 1989) . Copyright ©
1989. Reprinted by permission of the University of Wisconsin Press.

In January 1987, Kazuo Ishiguro confirmed his position as Britain's leading young novelist. He was awarded the Whitbread Book of the Year Prize, the largest such cash prize in Britain, for his second novel, *An Artist of the Floating World*. Born in Nagasaki in 1954, Ishiguro left Japan at the age of five and has not returned since. In most respects he has become thoroughly English, but as a writer he still draws considerably on his early childhood memories of Japan, his family upbringing, and the great Japanese films of the fifties.

Soon after publishing a few short stories, Ishiguro jumped to prominence in 1982 with his first novel, *A Pale View of Hills. A Pale View of Hills* was awarded the Royal Society of Literature's Winifred Holtby Prize and has since been translated into eleven languages. With great subtlety, Ishiguro presents a first-person narrator, Etsuko, a middle-aged Japanese woman, now exiled in England some thirty years after World War II. Traumatized by the recent suicide of her elder daughter, she tells her own story and that of a wayward friend in postwar Nagasaki before she left. Her enigmatic recall, tantalizingly hamstrung by gaps and internal inconsistencies, works toward a disquieting and haunting revelation, masterfully embedded in the point of view itself.

Ishiguro's second novel, *An Artist of the Floating World*, is set in the Japan of the late forties. Ono, an aging painter, gropes in his diary entries toward a realization of the ironies of Japan's recent history, in which his own earlier, sincere convictions have enmeshed him. The gently ironic conclusion leaves Ono both humiliated and dignified, a kind of comic Everyman figure, wistfully trapped within his own horizons. Once more the first-person perspective allows Ishiguro to finesse the confines of a linear plot, and again the author evinces an extraordinary control of voice, an uncannily Japanese quality emanating from his perfectly pitched English prose.

This interview took place on December 8, 1986, in Mr. Ishiguro's South London home. Throughout the course of his remarks, Ishiguro emerges as his own most discriminating interpreter and sternest critic. His meticulous interest in the craft of fiction and lucid grasp of his own aims and methods make this conversation an unusually valuable introduction and companion to the author's works.

Q. How did your family's move in 1960 from Japan to England affect your upbringing and education?
A. My parents have remained fairly Japanese in the way they go about things, and being brought up in a family you tend to operate the way that family operates. I still speak to my parents in Japanese. I'll switch back into Japanese as soon as I walk through the door. But my Japanese isn't very good. It's like a five-year-old's Japanese, mixed in with English vocabulary, and I use all the wrong forms. Apart from that, I've had a typical English education. I grew up in the south of England and went to a typical British school. At Kent University, I studied philosophy and English, and at East Anglia I did an M.A. in creative writing.

Q. Do you feel you're writing in any particular tradition?
A. I feel that I'm very much of the Western tradition. And I'm quite often amused when reviewers make a lot of my being Japanese and try to mention the two or three authors they've vaguely heard of, comparing me to Mishima or something. It seems highly inappropriate. I've grown up reading Western fiction: Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Charlotte Brontë, Dickens.

Q. Are there any influences from the Japanese side as well?
A. Tanizaki, Kawabata, Ibuse, and a little Soseki, perhaps. But I'm probably more influenced by Japanese movies. I see a lot of Japanese films. The visual images of Japan have a great poignancy for me, particularly in domestic films like those of Ozu and Naruse, set in the postwar era, the Japan I actually remember.

Q. Your first novel, *A Pale View of Hills,* also deals with memories of Japan, but they are repressed memories with ellipses that the reader has to work to fill in.
A. Yes. In that book, I was trying something rather odd with the narrative. The main strategy was to leave a big gap. It's about a Japanese woman, Etsuko, who is exiled in Britain in middle age, and there's a certain area of her life that's very painful to her. It has something to do with her coming over to the West and the effect it has on her daughter, who subsequently commits suicide. She talks all around it, but she leaves that as a gap. Instead, she tells another story altogether, going back years and talking about somebody she once knew. So the whole narrative strategy of the book was about how someone ends up talking about things they cannot face directly through other people's stories. I was trying to explore that type of language, how people use the language of self-deception and self-protection.

Q. There are certain things, a bit like in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw,* that are just unresolved. For instance, in the pivotal scene on the bridge when Etsuko is talking to her friend Sachiko's daughter Mariko, she switches without warning to addressing the child as if she herself were actually the child's mother. At the most extreme, that leads the reader to ponder whether the two women were not one and the same person.
A. What I intended was this: because it's really Etsuko talking about herself, and possibly that somebody else, Sachiko, existed or did not exist, the meanings that Etsuko imputes to the life of Sachiko are obviously the meanings that are relevant to her (Etsuko's) own life. Whatever the facts were about what happened to Sachiko and her daughter, they are of interest to Etsuko now because she can use them to talk about herself. So you have this highly Etsuko-ed version of this other person's story; and at the most intense point, I wanted to suggest that Etsuko had dropped this cover. It just slips out: she's now talking about herself. She's no longer bothering to put it in the third person.

Q. I thought that the effect of this scene was quite stunning.
A. Yes, that scene itself works all right, if the rest of the book had built up to that kind of ambiguity. But the trouble is that the flash-backs are too clear, in a way. They seem to be related with the authority of some kind of realistic fiction. It doesn't have the same murkiness of someone trying to wade through their memories, trying to manipulate memories, as I would have wanted. The mode is wrong in those scenes of the past. They don't have the texture of memory. And for that reason the ending doesn't quite come off. It's just too sudden. I intended with that scene for the reader finally to realize, with a sense of inevitability, "Of course, yes, she's finally said it." Instead, it's a shock. I didn't quite have the technical sophistication to pull it off, and the result is that it's a bit baffling. Fortunately, a lot of people quite enjoy being baffled. As you say, you're knocked over sideways. You feel you have to read the book again, which is a different sort of effect.

Q. There is a dissonace between the picture that Etsuko paints of herself when back in Japan as a very timid, conventional person and the rather bold, unconventional things she emerges as actually having done: leaving her husband, leaving her homeland, and so on. That's another gap the reader has to wrestle with.
A. Yes, that's the gap in *A Pale View of Hills.* We can assume that the real Etsuko of the past is somewhat nearer the mousy Etsuko she talks about in the forties than she is to the Sachiko figure. After all, that is her account, the emotional story of how she came to leave Japan, although that doesn't tell you the actual facts. But I'm not interested in the solid facts. The focus of the book is elsewhere, in the emotional upheaval.

Q. In some ways, especially in the dream sections, it seems as if Etsuko is trying to punish herself. She lashes herself with grief and guilt at the suicide of her daughter Keiko. Yet in other ways, it seems as if she's trying to rearrange the past so that she doesn't come out of it too badly. Am I right in seeing these two things?
A. Yes, the book is largely based around her guilt. She feels a great guilt, that out of her own emotional longings for a different sort of life, she sacrificed her first daughter's happiness. There is that side to her that feels resistant to her younger daughter Nikki, who tells her, "You've got nothing to worry about," and that she did exactly the right things. She feels that this isn't quite a true account. But on the other hand, she does need to arrange her memories in a way that allows her to salvage some dignity.

Q. There were some partly developed comic themes in *A Pale View of Hills,* but they didn't quite take hold.
A. Yes, whatever echoes I wanted to start between Etsuko and Ogata, the father-in-law, very much faded away. Let's say I was a less experienced writer at that point, and I think that one of the things that happens to less experienced writers is that you cannot control the book, as more experienced writers can. You bring in an element without realizing what the implication of this is on the rest of the book. A lot of the things I was initially most interested in got completely upstaged by things I almost inadvertently set in motion. But you get very excited when you're writing your first novel. And once having figured out these clever little narrative strategies, then you bring in this and you bring in that, and suddenly you find that two-thirds of the book is concerned with something else altogether. The Etusko–Sachiko story about exile and parental responsibility

was essentially something which I waylaid myself into. I often would bring in things simply because they worked rather nicely on that particular page in that particular chapter. And suddenly, I'd find myself with a daughter who'd hung herself, or whatever, on my hands and I'd have to figure out how to deal with that. If you really want to write something, you shouldn't bring things into your book lightly. It's a bit like taking in lodgers. They're going to be with you a long time. I think the most important thing I learned between writing the first and second novels is the element of thematic discipline.

Q. What drew you to your subject and to the theme of the older artist in your second novel, *An Artist of the Floating World?* Were you thinking of anyone in particular, or of any groups?
A. Not really, no. I suppose I was thinking of myself and my peers, the generation that came to university in the sixties and the seventies. I write out of a kind of projected fear of reaching a certain age and looking back. I am interested in that particular form of wasting one's talents, not because you spent your whole life lying on your back, not doing anything. I'm interested in people who, in all sincerity, work very hard and perhaps courageously in their lifetimes toward something, fully believing that they're contributing to something good, only to find that the social climate has done a topsy-turvy on them by the time they've reached the ends of their lives. The very things they thought they could be proud of have now become things they have to be ashamed of. I'm drawn to that period in Japanese history because that's what happened to a whole generation of people. They lived in a moral climate that right up until the end of the war said that the most praise-worthy thing they could do was to use their talents to further the nationalist cause in Japan, only to find after the war that this had been a terrible mistake. *An Artist of the Floating World* is an exploration of somebody trying to come to terms with the fact that he has somehow misused his talents unknowingly, simply because he didn't have any extraordinary power of insight into the world he lived in.

Q. Where is *An Artist of the Floating World* set?
A. It's just an imaginary city, for various reasons. Once I set it in an actual city, then the obligation to actually check up would become boringly relevant, and there seemed to be no point. It was of no value to me if I could claim that it's authentically set in Tokyo or not. In fact, in many ways it would play into the

hands of a certain kind of misreader, who wished the book to be simply some kind of realist text telling you what Tokyo was like after the war. By setting it in an unspecified venue, I could suggest that I'm offering this as a novel about people and their lives, and that this isn't some piece of documentary writing about a real city. And it just gave me a lot more freedom. If I wanted a pavilion with lanterns around its eaves, I could just invent one. I could invent as many districts as I could think of names. All these things would have been technically rather irksome, if I had had to keep referring to a map, and to the actual history of Tokyo.

The other temptation was to set it in Nagasaki, the only Japanese city I have some familiarity with, and which I could have got some people to tell me about. But of course, overwhelmingly for Western readers, when you bring in Nagasaki they think of the atomic bomb, and I had no place for the atomic bomb in this novel. And so, although possibly I might have been able to refer more or less authentically to Nagasaki landmarks and districts, I didn't want to do it simply because it would have been another bomb book.

Q. Was there any particular reason why you had your central character be a painter, rather than a writer, or even an actor?
A. No great reason, no. I was not intrinsically interested in painting or painters. It just seemed to me that a painter served my purposes better than some of the other careers. I think it's always dangerous to have a writer in a novel. That leads you into all kinds of areas, unless you're specifically interested in talking about the nature of fiction. But I try to avoid that very postmodern element in my books.

Q. Did you do any research into how painters' groups at the time behaved? What props did you have in imagining these scenes?
A. I did very little research, primarily because research is only of any interest to me in order to check up after I've done something, to make sure I'm not getting anything wildly wrong. I need certain things to be the way they are in my books for the purposes of my themes. In *An Artist of the Floating World,* I needed to portray this world where a leader figure held this incredible psychological sway over his subordinates. And for subordinates to break free, they had to display a remarkable amount of determination. That's what I needed, and as far as I was concerned, things in my Japan were going to operate like that. I am not essentially concerned with a realist purpose in writing.

I just invent a Japan which serves my needs. And I put that Japan together out of little scraps, out of memories, out of speculation, out of imagination.

Q. In some respects, you have a narrative setup in *An Artist of the Floating World* similar to that in *A Pale View of Hills.* The whole narrative is recounted by a person who is somewhat unreliable, so the reader has to attend to other things to gauge the extent of the unreliability. Ono, the narrator, addresses the reader directly with the book's opening sentence: "If on a sunny day you climb the steep path . . . ." This strikes an almost intimate tone, as if he is talking to a friend or acquaintance. Elsewhere, his account sounds more like an apologia, a public explanation for what he did. Who is the "reader" here, and what exactly is the narrative situation?
A. The reader that I intended obviously isn't the "you" that Ono refers to. Ono in his narrative assumes that anybody reading it must live in the city and must be aware of its landmarks. I used that device mainly to create a world. I thought it helped strengthen this mental landscape mapped out entirely by what Ono was conscious of, and nothing else. And whether the reader registers it consciously or not, it cannot help but create the effect of actually eavesdropping on Ono being intimate with somebody in his own town. To a large extent, the reason for Ono's downfall was that he lacked a perspective to see beyond his own environment and to stand outside the actual values of his time. So the question of this parochial perspective was quite central to the book, and I tried to build that into the whole narrative. At the same time, I'm suggesting that Ono is fairly normal; most of us have similar parochial visions. So the book is largely about the inability of normal human beings to see beyond their immediate surroundings, and because of this, one is at the mercy of what this world immediately around one proclaims itself to be.

Q. With the somewhat doddery narrator's constant digressions, the plot line keeps fanning out all the time. Does this suggest that you're trying to escape from the tyranny of a linear plot?
A. Yes, yes it does! I don't like the idea that A has to come before B and that B has to come before C because the plot dictates it. I want certain things to happen in a certain order, according to how I feel the thing should be arranged tonally or whatever. I can have Ono in a certain kind of emotional mood or emotional way of talking about things when I want him to be, and it looks like he's just drifted, but from my point of view, it's quite contrived. I've figured

out little transitory connecting paragraphs whereby he appears to drift from one section to the next. This might give the sense of his being old and vulnerable, but people do tend to talk like this anyway. And more crucially, people tend to think like this. So I'm not dictated to by the chronology of events, and I can reveal things just when I want to.

Q. And again, there are unresolved points of fact in the narrative, open to varying constructions by the reader.
A. Yes. As usual, I'm not overwhelmingly interested in what really did happen. What's important is the emotional aspect, the actual positions the characters take up at different points in the story, and why they need to take up these positions.

Q. At the same time, you draw a very explicit thematic parallel between the way Ono's mentor treated him, confiscating his pictures and expelling him from his villa, and the way that Ono subsequently treats his own pupil, Kuroda.
A. I'm pointing to the master-pupil thing recurring over and over again in the world. In a way, I'm using Japan as a sort of metaphor. I'm trying to suggest that this isn't something peculiar to Japan, the need to follow leaders and the need to exercise power over subordinates, as a sort of motor by which society operates. I'm inviting Western readers to look at this not as a Japanese phenomenon but as a human phenomenon.

Q. In the floating world of urban Tokugawa Japan, with its pleasure quarters and puppet plays, or at least in the art that came out of the floating world, irreconcilable conflicts are often resolved by melodramatic suicides. The title of your book, *An Artist of the Floating World,* necessarily conjures resonances of this whole tradition. Yet you offer a gently ironic, comic solution to your tale, somewhat at variance with the more melodramatic, conventional expectations of the genre. Life-affirming values prevail, rather than everything descending into a welter of despair or the cliché of suicide. The narrative does hint, at certain points, that Ono's family are worried about such a possibility. Instead, Ono owns up to his errors, makes his accommodation with the changing times, and still manages to cling to a measure of self-vindication. Were you in any sense offering an untraditional or even un-Japanese resolution to his conflict?
A. Well, you see, I don't feel that it is un-Japanese. A while ago, I published a short story entitled "A Family Supper." The story was basically just a big trick,

playing on Western readers' expectations about Japanese people who kill themselves. It's never stated, but Western readers are supposed to think that these people are going to commit mass suicide, and of course they do nothing of the sort.

This business about committing *seppuku* or whatever. It's as alien to me as it is to you. And it's as alien to most modern Japanese as it is to Western people. The Japanese are in love with these melodramatic stories where heroes commit suicide, but people in Japan don't go around killing themselves as easily as people in the West assume. And so my book may not have a traditional Japanese story ending in that sense, but a lot of the great Japanese movies of the fifties would not dream of having an ending like that. And if I borrow from any tradition, it's probably from that tradition that tries to avoid anything that is overtly melodramatic or plotty, that tries basically to remain within the realms of everyday experience.

I'm very keen that whenever I portray books that are set in Japan, even if it's not very accurately Japan, that people are seen to be just people. I ask myself the same questions about my Japanese characters that I would about English characters, when I'm asking the big questions, what's really important to them. My experience of Japanese people in this realm is that they're like everybody else. They're like me, my parents. I don't see them as people who go around slashing their stomachs.

Q. What sort of mood did you wish to portray in the narrator, Ono, by the end of the book?
A. I wanted that slightly painful and bittersweet feeling of him thinking: "Japan made a mess of it, but how marvelous that in a few years it's all set to have a completely fresh go. But a man's life isn't like that. In a man's life, there's only room for this one go." And Ono's done it, he made a go of it, and it didn't turn out well. His world is over, and all he can do is wish the younger generation well, but he is no part of that world. And I was interested in the various strategies somebody would employ to try to salvage some sort of dignity, to get into a position where he could say, "Well, at least X, Y, and Z." In a way, Ono is continually being cornered. He keeps having to admit this and admit that, and in the end he even accepts his own smallness in the world. I suppose I wanted to suggest that a person's dignity isn't necessarily dependent on what he achieves in his life or in his career; that there is something dignified about Ono in the end that arises simply out of his being human.

Q. And through the course of his narrative, the reader can see Ono, to preserve his self-esteem, gradually making concessions and accommodations that he himself cannot see?
A. Yes, that certainly was the intention. It uses very much the diary method. Technically, the advantage of the diary narrative is that each entry can be written from a different emotional position. What he writes in October 1948 is actually written out of a different set of assumptions than the pieces that are written later on. That really was the sole reason for dividing the book up into four chunks, each ostensibly written in a sitting or whatever at the point when the date is given: just so we can actually watch his progress, and so that the language itself changes slightly.

Q. And this in turn underscores the larger theme of the ironies and vicissitudes of the floating world. Having rejected the demimonde "floating world" subjects of his mentor, Ono received the patriotic award for his propagandist poster art and experienced a short moment of triumph. But this too was fleeting.
A. Yes, that's why he is the artist of the floating world, just as the floating world celebrated transitory pleasures. Even if they were gone by the morning, and they were built on nothing, at least you enjoyed them at the time. The idea is that there are no solid things. And the irony is that Ono had rejected that whole approach to life. But in the end, he too is left celebrating those pleasures that evaporated when the morning light dawned. So the floating world comes to refer, in the larger metaphorical sense, to the fact that the values of society are always in flux.

Q. Your first-person narrators, a late middle-aged woman in *A Pale View of Hills* and an older man in *An Artist of the Floating World,* are far removed from you in your personal situation. How did you manage to inhabit these people? Through some kind of imaginative migration?
A. It never occurred to me that it would be a technical difficulty. It's rather like the question about realism and Japanese details. I didn't start from the point of view of saying, "What does a middle-aged woman think like?" That way you can get very intimidated by the whole project. I needed a certain consciousness, a certain state of mind, and it just naturally followed that this would be a middle-aged woman or an older man. Ono couldn't be anything else.

Q. It is remarkable, for someone writing in English, how much of a Japanese texture your writing achieves. How, for instance, did you set about the

problem of projecting differentiated Japanese voices through the medium of the English language?
A. There are two things. Because I am writing in the first person, even the prose has to conform to the characterization of the narrator. Etsuko, in *A Pale View of Hills,* speaks in a kind of Japanese way because she's a Japanese woman. When she sometimes speaks about Japanese things, explaining what a *kujibiki* stand is, for instance, it becomes clear that she's speaking English and that it's a second language for her. So it has to have that kind of carefulness, and , particularly when she's reproducing Japanese dialogue in English, it has to have a certain foreignness about it.

The thing about Ono in *An Artist of the Floating World* is that he's supposed to be narrating in Japanese; it's just that the reader is getting it in English. In a way the language has to be almost like a pseudotranslation, which means that I can't be too fluent and I can't use too many Western colloquialisms. It has to be almost like subtitles, to suggest that behind the English language there's a foreign language going on. I'm quite conscious of actually figuring these things out when I'm writing, using a certain kind of translationese. Sometimes my ear will say: "That doesn't quite ring true, that kind of language. Fine if this were just English people, but not here."

Q. When you write, do you have anyone who helps you to revise?
A. I tend to work entirely alone. I have an editor at Faber, Robert McCrum, who often sees the penultimate draft. In both novels, he made suggestions that were very helpful, but they tend to be pretty minor. Normally he'll point to that part of the book that seems to be weak and ask me to look at it again. But I'll only show him my manuscript when I think It's more or less finished. And I certainly don't do this business of going through the prose with somebody else, page by page.

Q. Do you feel any pressure to experiment formally?
A. I did at a certain time. When literary people talk about "young writers," they almost imply that this is synonymous with writers who are experimenting. You often read phrases like, "They're smashing up this, or subverting that." So I think that it's very natural to feel that the older generation has somehow already done that, and that now you've got to. But I try not to let it become too central to what I'm writing. The kind of book I find very tedious is the kind of book whose *raison d'être* is to say something about literary form. I'm only interested in literary experiment insofar as it serves a purpose

of exploring certain themes with an emotional dimension. I always try to disguise those elements of my writing that I feel perhaps are experimental.

Q. What are you working on now?
A. I'm writing another novel. This one is set in England. It's about a butler who wants to get close to a great man, close to the center of history. I also write television films. I've written two of these and we're trying to get a third off the ground, this time a cinema film. So I've always got at least two things going, a screenplay and a novel. Filmmaking is very, very different from writing. You shoot to a set schedule, and the crew knocks off at a certain time; otherwise you pay a fortune in overtime. You just haven't got the opportunity to keep doing scenes over and over till they're perfect. It's almost like a concert performance or something, where you've got to get it right, then and there. It's somewhere between a performance art and the more meditative, deliberate production that writing is. In writing, you can rewrite and rewrite and rewrite at no cost, other than what it costs for the paper, and you can spend a long, long time.

Q. How do you see your work developing, and what do you see as your abiding preoccupations?
A. Well, it's very difficult to say if I'll have the same preoccupations in ten years' time that I have today. There are certain things in my books that I'm not particularly interested in, although they have taken up a fairly important chunk of my writing. I'm not particularly interested in themes about parental responsibility, or even about exile, although these seem to be very much to the fore in the first book. I'm not all interested in the question of suicide, although I'm aware that that has been in both books in some form or another. But things like memory, how one uses memory for one's own purposes, one's own ends, those things interest me more deeply. And so, for the time being, I'm going to stick with the first person, and develop the whole business about following somebody's thoughts around, as they try to trip themselves up or to hide from themselves.

In Conversation with Kazuo Ishiguro

Christopher Bigsby / 1987

From *Writers in Conversation: Volume 1*, pp. 193–204. Reprinted by permission of Pen & Inc Press.

Kazuo Ishiguro was born in Nagasaki, Japan, in 1954, but was raised in England. He studied at the University of Kent and, as part of the creative writing programme, at the University of East Anglia. His first two novels, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) and *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), were both set in a Japan which he had in part invented. These were followed by the immensely successful *The Remains of the Day* (1989), set in pre-war Britain and narrated by an elderly butler whose belief in loyalty and personal dignity allows him to compromise more fundamental values. *The Unconsoled* was published in 1995, followed by *When We Were Orphans* in 2000. This interview was conducted in 1987, during the writing of *The Remains of the Day*.

Bigsby: You were born in Japan, but left at the age of five and were brought up in England. Do you have any memories of that earlier life back of Japan?
Ishiguro: Oddly enough, I do. People find this remarkable but I do have very vivid memories, though they may be inaccurate. I think that possibly they are so vivid because there was such an enormous change in my life and if there is such a change you have something to anchor your memories to. What I recall is nothing monumental. I am sure there were significant things that happened to me in the first five years of my life, but I just remember ordinary things like standing in a street with my grandfather looking at a film poster, or cutting my thumb with a pair of scissors. These very little things have somehow stayed. But I have a vast array of such memories.

Bigsby: How far, once you were in this country, did you find yourself playing the young immigrant role of mediating between your parents and what, presumably, to them was much more of an alien culture?

Ishiguro: Very rapidly, probably by the time I was six, a year after my arrival. I think I could probably speak English better than either of my parents. I was certainly much more confident so I can't recall a time when I didn't speak English. There must have been a point when I was picking it up, but when you are that young you are not so self-conscious about not being fully in control of a language. So I just operated like all the other kids. I must have picked it up very quickly. Almost as far back as I can remember, there were areas of British life that I was much more familiar with than either of my parents, though, of course, there were things, many things, my parents had to teach me.

Bigsby: Did that change the power relationship between you and your father?
Ishiguro: It is very hard to say because I don't have anything to compare it with. Besides which the power relationships in Japanese family are actually very different from those that I have observed in Western families. It doesn't quite operate in the same way. The person who is directly in charge of the child is the mother. Very much so, much more so than in a Western family. Of course the father takes an interest, but educating the kids, bringing up the kids, is not in his realm.

Bigsby: But, even in the case of your mother, you must have translated and not just literally. You must have explained things to her because they were familiar to you. You were growing up with them.
Ishiguro: Yes, yes. I am sure that is the case. But, as I said, I am sure there are all kinds of thing that she taught me.

Bigsby: I imagine you must be very irritated, at times, to be treated as though you were a Japanese writer. Nonetheless, do you see yourself as being wholly British or are there elements in your sensibility you can separate out as being more Japanese?
Ishiguro: I don't think I am wholly British in the cultural sense, simply because I have been brought up by Japanese parents. My education outside the home was very British. I went to state grammar school and then to two British universities. In that sense, yes, I had a very typical British education. But inside the home we speak Japanese still, in my parents' house. I was always very conscious that they brought me up differently to the way my friends' parents were bringing them up.

Bigsby: In what ways?
Ishiguro: In all kinds of ways. As I said, the relationship was different. The very assumptions behind the relationship were different. I suppose, in practical terms, it looked as though my parents treated me rather indulgently by Western standards. A lot of Western observers of Japanese families think that. Boys in particular tend to be treated like mini gods. Japan is a country, or at least it was as I remember it, where adults get up for children on a tram if there is a shortage of seats. Little children are almost worshipped as precious things and everything must be done for them. My parents brought me up rather along those lines.

But there is more to this than meets the eye. It's not simply that Japanese children are allowed to run wild and do whatever they like. There is another side to it. Japanese children are actually taught their moral obligations to parents very early in life and the moral pressure to do certain things becomes very great and occurs much earlier than with most Western children. For instance, I wouldn't do my homework because my mother or my father happened to be standing over me shouting at me to do it. I would do it because I would feel this terrible guilt if I didn't. That process starts early. I suppose this is why Japanese families can operate in a way that may be slightly mysterious to a Western observer. In this rather old way, with very little actually being said, the training starts very early.

Bigsby: You speak Japanese. Do you write Japanese?
Ishiguro: No, I don't. It is a formidably difficult language to master unless you grow up with it, I think. I should explain to you that in Japanese there are two phonetic alphabets and then there is this thing which is probably what most Western people think of as written Japanese. This consists of characters taken over from the Chinese script many centuries ago. There are about two thousand of these and you need to master at least a thousand to be literate. Each one of these characters is rather intricate and difficult to reproduce. You have to be technically quite deft to reproduce one that looks respectable. One character doesn't stand for one word or one concept. The same one could stand for different concepts entirely, depending on how they are combined. It is a very difficult written language to learn and, of course, when I left Japan at the age of five my education came to a bit of an end as regards learning to write Japanese. My parents made an effort to continue it, but it is a hopeless task, I suppose, if you are in a different country.

Bigsby: Did you always think of writing as a career you were heading for?
Ishiguro: Oh no, not at all. I can't really remember a time when I wanted to be a writer. I wanted to be a musician and that was always my ambition. I think that ambition died when my first novel was published. Then I thought, well, I had better make a go of this career.

Bigsby: Did you compose music?
Ishiguro: Compose is rather a grand word. I used to write songs. I played guitar and piano, and I am not quite sure if I wanted to be a musician or a rock star. It was a very natural thing for someone in their teens, growing up in the late 1960s and 1970s, to aspire towards being a rock star but part of me genuinely enjoys playing music and I think that is the part I am left with now. A lot of the rest of it was just a sheer desire to be a certain type of thing. I suppose I see that among people who want to be writers, or indeed who are writers. It is possible to distinguish between the urge to want to write and the urge to want to be a writer. You want to be this deified thing called a writer. I think quite often these two things can actually be contradictory. At least, these urges are perhaps not supported by each other.

Bigsby: You seem, however, to have elected to be a writer when you enrolled in the MA in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia. But is writing something you can be taught?
Ishiguro: I would have to be sceptical about the idea that you can create a writer simply through courses and exercises. You can certainly produce someone who can write more competently. But I would be rather more sceptical about the possibility of their producing anything of artistic worth. I think what a creative writing course can do is to provide the conditions in which people who are serious about writing can discover whether they want to write, whether they can write and what they want to write. It can provide space and the right sort of climate in which a certain quality somebody may have may come to the fore.

I think the East Anglia course is very good in the sense that it holds back quite a lot, at least it did when I was there. There was plenty of time for you just to get on with things unhindered and unassisted. There was no pressure to write in a particular style or to address a particular topic. There was an emphasis on a diversity of what constituted good writing, rather than saying here is model A, B and C, take your pick and reproduce them. It was very much the case that students should try and find something that rang true to them.

Bigsby: Did the MA change the way you wrote?
Ishiguro: That was when I really started to write. So it was very fundamental. Before I went to East Anglia I had written very little indeed, certainly nothing I would count today as proper writing. I had written nothing that I drafted and revised and thought about in the way that I today think about what I call writing. The stuff I had done prior to East Anglia I would define as typing rather than writing. I typed up lots of notes of my travels around America.

Bigsby: Martin Amis stuff?
Ishiguro: More like Jack Kerouac, I think. It was a thinly disguised autobiographical sort of writing, where you have a friend called John, change his name to Peter and claim to be writing fiction. You just write up whatever happens to you. I did a little of that kind of thing. I stumbled across the East Anglia creative writing course almost by accident. I was actually looking for an MA in English to do at that time. I had spent a year doing social work in London. It was a very stressful, busy year and the idea of going back to university suddenly seemed like bliss. I was looking through a lot of prospectuses when I came across this thing called an MA in creative writing, which certainly looked to me a lot more appealing and perhaps even less work than English. Of course, when I was accepted, there was a moment of slight panic because I thought I would now be exposed, there would be very good writers there and I would have to present work that would be laughed at. So, the summer before I went to East Anglia, I started to write, I think for the first time, very seriously. I started to write short stories and that is the first time I actually thought in terms of structure, well, even in terms of things like plot and character, these very traditional things.

Bigsby: Can you remember the genesis of your first novel, *A Pale View of Hills?*
Ishiguro: It is very difficult to nail these things down. I began that in 1979/80, during the year I was at East Anglia. In fact, the bulk of the time I was at East Anglia I was writing that book. I did the short stories I presented to the rest of the course, but I wrote those all in one go at the beginning of the year.

I had written all the short stories by November, I remember, because I had a kind of deadline. That was when my birthday was and I wanted to finish these short stories by then. So it was ideal, really. I had a lot of time on that course and I started off that novel. When I began it, though, it was set in Cornwall in the 1970s and had fairly youngish characters. In other words, it was rather like an autobiographical novel, in the sense that it seemed directly to be about people of my generation, people like me. Somewhere along the way I discovered that I could write better, more effectively, if I changed the setting and put the whole thing at a greater distance. In a way I think that is what I have been doing since.

I do feel I am essentially someone who writes very much about my generation and the world around me, that is to say, the West in the 1970s and 1980s, rather than someone who tries to recreate historical periods. Although on the surface of it my first two novels were set in the late 1940s in Japan, for me the primary impetus for these novels lies elsewhere than in the setting.

Bigsby: Can you elaborate a little, because they are not only set in the 1940s but the characters through whom they are narrated are not your contemporaries by any means?
Ishiguro: No, they are not. Setting is, I suppose, valuable to me not simply because of the physical backdrop, but because of the kinds of characters and political situations I then have access to. I am drawn to periods in history where more values in society have undergone a sudden change because a lot of the things I am interested in tend to find a cutting edge in those situations. I am interested in how people who tried to do something good and useful in their lives suddenly find that they had misplaced their efforts. Not only have they perhaps wasted their talent and their energies, but perhaps they have contributed unknowingly to something that was evil all the time, thinking they were doing good. People are distressingly at the mercy of the society around them. They take their cues as to what they should do with their talents, their good intentions from society.

I am at the moment, and I have been for some time, interested, as a writer, in this process of how people evaluate their lives when they look back and feel perhaps that they have not spent them in the way they would have wished. I am interested in how they try to cling on to some sense of dignity when they are faced with the idea that perhaps they have wasted their lives. Given that these are the kinds of areas, dramatically speaking, I am interested

in, I am then very much drawn to those periods in history when moral values have done a kind of topsy-turvy on individuals. This was true of Japan after the war when the very things that everyone had been told were the highest achievements suddenly turned out to be contributions to a dreadful nightmare. I suppose the postwar era in Germany would present a similar example. Not all such situations are quite so obvious or dramatic, however.

Bigsby: In what way does that bear on your own period? You were saying that this is a deliberate act of displacement, because you actually wished to address your own period. In what sense do you see these things working themselves out?
Ishiguro: I suppose I write out of a sort of fear of what might happen to me rather than what has happened to me. I feel I am very much part of that very fortunate generation for whom life was not simply a matter of just earning a living to provide yourself and your family with enough comfort to have something like a decent life. I grew up very much in that affluent era when it seemed that it was not enough simply to earn your living. You had to do something useful with your life, something good for humanity in some way: improve the world, make the world a better, more peaceful place. I suppose I grew up in that climate of 1960s idealism. I came through school and went to university in that time when people like myself and my peers competed with each other, not in terms of whether we were going to get jobs that would enable us to have bigger cars than the next person, but really in terms of how useful we were being. Were we making a useful contribution to humanity? Were we ideologically sound?

I feel I am a part of that generation for whom making something good out of your life, morally good, was a very conscious thing. I suppose I now write out of a kind of fear, that I project about my own life, that I will reach a certain age and look back on my life, and perhaps the lives of the people around me, and ask what became of all of us who made such an effort to make something useful of our lives.

Bigsby: There is a fear here, then, that on the one hand what you are doing may prove irrelevant or worse, while on the other you may be conspiring in a process to which you would not wish to subscribe.
Ishiguro: Yes, both of those things. I am very conscious, and have become more so since my more idealistic days, that it is awfully difficult not simply to

be at the mercy of the prevalent social or political climate. Very few of us seem to possess that kind of special perspective, that insight into the situation that surrounds us, which enables us to make decisions over and above what the crowd around us is baying for. So this question of trying to do something useful with your life is very difficult. It is not good enough to follow the people around you and do what they say. It seems to me history has shown over and over again that you can do that and do something disastrous.

Bigsby: In *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World* you set yourself difficult problems of narrative. The first is told through the sensibility and the voice of a woman, and the second through that of a fairly elderly man. Was that challenge part of the attraction?
Ishiguro: No. I didn't see either of them as a challenge. This is not modesty. I find that I have great difficulty writing from the perspective of a character who is in any way like me, superficially, I mean. That is, somebody about my age, living in, say, contemporary Britain. I just find it awfully difficult to write through that sort of protagonist. In a way, I can focus what is important and what isn't important for me, as a writer, if I choose a narrator or a protagonist who is, on the surface at least, very different from me. Certainly I choose those narrators, I suppose as a lot of people choose narrators, simply because they are the easiest narrators for me at the time, given what I want to do. I did try other sorts of narrators.

Just about every character who appears in *An Artist of the Floating Word* was a candidate to be a narrator at some point. I gave the little grandson a go while one of the daughters, Mariko, narrated for a while. There was a character who is not in it any more who was a narrator. I tried all kinds of things. As far as *A Pale View of Hills* is concerned, I had written a short story, early on in my year at East Anglia, which was written from the point of view of a woman, rather like the narrator in that novel. I found it a stunningly liberating experience, writing from the point of view of somebody apparently very different from me. I suppose there are those writers who write best through narrators similar to them. But I find I am less inhibited, more intimate, if I can hide behind a narrator who is very different from me.

Bigsby: But there is another sense in which you distance yourself. One way is through gender and age, but your prose is emotionally drained, distant and deliberately flattened, isn't it?

Ishiguro: I suppose you could say that, though I am not conscious of going to my manuscript and saying, 'Too much emotion in this sentence. Choose another word that is flatter or more dead.' It is just part of my style. Of course, the narrator you choose has a very significant impact on the texture of the narrative. I have to write in this way because of the narrator and the subject matter I have chosen.

In both cases, in particular the second novel, I am interested in narrators who are trying to evade certain truths about themselves and about their pasts. They are, in other words, dealing with the language of self-deception. So, for this very reason, I have to employ a language which is forever flinching from facing up to something. Hence, I suppose, this tension. I don't think I would necessarily write like that whatever I wrote, but given that I have set myself this task of having to portray the mind of somebody trying to examine something, while at the same time trying to avoid it, I have to write in that sort of prose.

Bigsby: The test case is if you are writing another novel which is set in a different place. Are you not now writing one set in Britain?
Ishiguro: Yes, I am.

Bigsby: Has this resulted in a change of style and approach?
Ishigruo: No. I am writing in exactly the same way. I have always felt the setting, the Japanese element, was a relatively superficial part of my writing. It was something I brought in for reasons of technique, really. Although it is a setting to which I have obvious emotional attachments, it was nevertheless one that I introduced to orchestrate something else I was more fundamentally interested in. For me, the proof of this is that I have been working for the last two years on this novel set entirely in Britain, with not a Japanese in sight. I am not conscious of having made any major shifts in my approach to writing. It is very much the same sort of thing, except it has a different setting.

Bigsby: Of course, there is something that setting a book in Japan, especially Nagasaki, offers—namely a historical resonance, a free ride. Presumably that is lacking in Britain?
Ishiguro: I only set my first novel in Nagasaki. I think I was slightly naïve at the time when I did that. In fact, I think my first novel is naïve in several

ways, but that was one of them. I set it in Nagasaki simply because the Japan I remembered, and the Japan I am in any way familiar with, is Nagasaki. That is the only town in which I have ever lived, and that is where my parents were from. So it seemed natural for me to set a novel in Nagasaki. What I didn't quite appreciate was that, for most people in the West, Nagasaki is synonymous with the atomic bomb. That is not the case with me or my parents. It is many other things as well. Even today, many things come to my mind before the image of mushroom clouds.

I think by the time I wrote my second novel I was much more conscious that should I invoke Nagasaki then I really would have to acknowledge that whole issue—the atomic bomb, the nuclear debate—to some extent. If I was not prepared to deal with that as an important part of the book then I shouldn't carelessly evoke names like Nagasaki, even though I have a right to because I was born there. But I felt I shouldn't go in this direction, so for the second book I kept well away from Nagasaki and avoided bringing in that dimension. As you say, I think there is a temptation to get a bit of a free ride out of the resonance of names like Nagasaki and Hiroshima, Auschwitz, whatever. Among serious novelists, and I suppose I count myself in that category, there is a temptation to use that kind of seriousness in a rather spurious way, in a cynical way because it gets books sold. In the game of serious fiction there is a great temptation to pillage certain things from history for their seriousness value, to give your book that added woof. I think one has to be careful about that.

Bigsby: I am struck, in reading your books, not only by the short declarative sentences but also by the amount of dialogue. You have written plays for television, haven't you?
Ishiguro: Yes, I have finished two plays for television. When I look back on the two novels, I think the first is written much more like a script for either a play or a film. Page by page, it is very much dialogue with little bits of prose connecting the dialogue. But between the writing of the first novel and the second I started to write television plays and it became very unsatisfactory for me then to do in a fiction form something which I might as well be doing in a television script. So for this reason I started to write in a way which I thought could only work as prose fiction. I think there is a difference between the two novels technically, in the way they are written. *An Artist of the Floating World* doesn't go from A to B in quite the same way. It is not dialogue interspersed

with stage directions, which I suppose is the base unit for *A Pale View of Hills*. In a way I felt a novel should be something that couldn't be translated into another medium.

Bigsby: Despite the historical backdrop of both your novels, there is a closed space in which the characters live their lives, a tightly enclosed space. Can you imagine yourself writing a novel with the sort of broad historical brush that Timothy Mo did, for example, with *An Insular Possession?*
Ishiguro: I would like to, yes. I would like one day to write a kind of broad, sweeping novel. Obviously it is not simply a matter of how many characters there are. You don't automatically have a sweeping novel if you have three central characters, one based in Japan, one based in Russia, or America, or something. It would be sweeping in a superficial way, because you inevitably take in three countries, but I have a great urge to write a global novel, a novel that addresses things at the widest level, that is not in any sense parochial. But, at the moment, whenever I try to do this, the only method that occurs to me is to take a microcosm and hope that its significance will come from the universal nature of what I am dealing with.

But, yes, I do have ambitions to write a book somewhat like *An Insular Possession*; I am working myself up to writing a kind of epic global novel. I suppose a lot of people are always working themselves up to writing that kind of novel.

Bigsby: What is the greatest pleasure you take from being a writer?
Ishiguro: I appreciate the fact that I don't have to get up in the morning at a certain time and get a train to a certain office. I don't have to work with people I hate. I have enormous freedoms as to how I should spend my time and what I should work on. I have more freedom than freelance journalists do. I am almost given carte blanche to write whatever I want to and can take as much time over it as I want, providing the money doesn't run out. I don't have deadlines I have to meet. I don't have an editor who says you have to address this topic because our magazine is like this. So I have this tremendous freedom and I just have the freedom to think. I suppose a writer is in a privileged position anyway. But the great privilege is that you are given time to think. You are allowed to go away and ponder things in a way that most people don't.

In a way, I feel I have a responsibility to use this time to think. I appreciated the fact that if I feel I should read up on, say, colonial history, I have got the time to go to the library and take a few books and spend two weeks reading books on colonial history. That is nice. I don't actually particularly enjoy the activity of writing. I can't recall a single time when I was writing *An Artist of the Floating World* when I stopped at the end of the day and thought, well, that was great fun. Obviously there are times when a certain kind of satisfaction comes over you, but I don't remember enjoying the procedure of writing at any point. That is always a bit of a slog.

Interview: David Sexton Meets Kazuo Ishiguro

David Sexton / 1987

From the London *Literary Review* (January 1987), pp. 16–19. Reprinted by permission of the London *Literary Review*.

Kazuo Ishiguro is Britain's best Japanese novelist, possibly Britain's only Japanese novelist. His second novel *An Artist of the Floating World* has been heaped with praise. It was on the Booker shortlist and has won the Novel category in the Whitbread Literary Awards; it is deservedly favourite to become Whitbread Book of the Year when the judges meet on January 13.

Born in Nagasaki in 1954, Kazuo Ishiguro came to Britain with his parents in 1960. His father is a scientist, an oceanographer. When in 1983 Ishiguro was chosen as one of the twenty Best of Young British Novelists he was still in fact Japanese. He now holds a British passport. He lives in a long, quiet road in unsung Sydenham. When I went to see him before the publication of the book he was neatly dressed in black, rather in the fashion with which Japanese designers have conquered the world. He is very friendly and hospitable, indeed he struck me as actually happy, rare at anytime and certainly not what many seem while exposed to my skills as an interviewer. He is unexpectedly direct and open in his speech; he doesn't fence or quibble.

To hear him he is not detectably foreign. He has a firmly middle-class accent spiced with South London sounds. I asked him if he remembered learning English. He didn't. "I was only five. You pick it up awfully fast. I don't ever remember a time when I actually felt inconvenienced by not being able to speak. I still speak Japanese with my parents, not a very good Japanese. It's like a five-year-old's Japanese."

His written English has a beautiful limpidity. "Purely from the writing point of view there are advantages in not being too fluent in the language in which you write. It can get in the way of more important things in writing. There are distinct advantages in being quite self-conscious about the language that you use." Though he says he doesn't speak English as a foreigner,

he can think in Japanese. "If I'm back with my parents for a number of days my thought patterns are actually in Japanese. If I bang my toe a Japanese exclamation goes through my head rather than an English one."

He had, he says, "a fairly straightforward Southern English upbringing—very boring." After reading English and Philosophy at Kent he did an MA in Creative Writing with Malcolm Bradbury at East Anglia. He describes it as an honest course: "It probably is a good course in that it does really throw the responsibility back on the people who do it. There's very little in the way of prescribed work, there's vast amounts of time that you have to fill yourself. Nobody tells you what you should write. If you do produce something you have a very critical group of people there waiting for it. There's nowhere to hide. What it does mean is that a lot of people are traumatised while they're up there. The year I was there quite a few of them abandoned writing altogether and found the year very painful. In a way I think that's right. It's a place where people go to find if they're really serious about it or not. It's a case of what you come out with at the end."

Ishiguro's first stories, three of which were printed in Faber's *Introduction 7*, were fairly imitative. "Getting Poisoned" is pastiche Ian McEwan, I suggested. "I was consciously experimenting. It was rather exciting then. Just the challenge of, say, writing in diary form or in the present tense could actually be enough justification for writing a story. That kind of thing wouldn't sustain my interest now. As you say, I was trying to write an Ian McEwan story. When I was at East Anglia Ian McEwan was still—I suppose he still is—very much the vogueish young writer. The stuff he'd done at that time had been all that kind, adolescent sex and violence."

While he was at East Anglia he suddenly became interested in his Japanese background, until then pushed to one side. "At that stage I hadn't written anything set in Japan. It hadn't occurred to me to write out of the Japanese side of me at all." Then after two or three months he wrote a story (published in the Faber *Introduction*) called "A Strange and Sometimes Sadness." It was prompted, he says, by the "climate" of the course. "Malcolm Bradbury does like to emphasise very much the business about each writer having to find his or her own voice. He tends to emphasise the diversity of what good writing is and that it relates somehow to where it is coming from, rather than set up models." Though at the time this story seemed to be just "groping about," in retrospect it was a dry run for his first novel, *A Pale View of Hills*.

I asked about the importance of the atom bomb to his writing. "When I wrote that story (1979) the revival of the nuclear issue hadn't really taken off. It was just about that time there was the revival in concern and CND and so on. But at that time—it seems ridiculous and naive—I hadn't actually thought of it as a story that would be in any way relevant to the nuclear debate." I asked what kind of awareness he had had of the bombing as a child. "It was very peculiar. I didn't actually think it was a big deal. I didn't actually realise that Nagasaki was one of only two places in the world that had been atom-bombed until I was about eight or nine. It was in England at primary school, I discovered this in an encyclopedia. Until then I thought every city had an atomic bomb. It was with a peculiar sense of pride that I discovered that I come from Nagasaki, one of only two places in history to have suffered this. There was nothing in the way my parents spoke about the bomb, and I suspect about the way people in Nagasaki spoke about the bomb, that would indicate to a child that it was something momentous. People tended to speak of it rather like a natural disaster. They would say, that used to be there before the bomb, or that was built after the bomb. It was a marker in time. My parents speak about it with a lot of sadness when they talk about people they knew who died. My mother's father died shortly after the bomb due to the radiation almost certainly, although he'd been nowhere near the blast. But my mother has never spoken about it in any kind of bitter way and I've often puzzled over this. The Japanese on the whole don't seem to be very bitter about the atomic bomb. They're very passionate about pacifism and the nuclear issue but I don't get the impression they regard the atomic bombings as atrocities. That is curious."

Ishiguro is not quite sure what happened to his parents during the war. His father was too young to be a soldier, his mother was working in a factory. "She's told me about the day the bomb fell. My mother's family were on the other side of the city from where the bomb fell. Nagasaki wasn't a direct hit like Hiroshima. One half of the city was devastated, another half got through relatively unscathed, relatively being the operative word. Why my mother's father was affected by the radiation I suspect is that everybody went to the devastated parts to help out. There was this desperate few days when bodies had to be burnt. It was the height of summer, great fear of disease. It must have been something very close to hell, this scene of intolerable heat from the burning buildings and corpses upon corpses which had to be burnt as quickly as possible before anything awful started to spread. Anybody who could walk had to go into the city to do this very grim task. It meant a lot of people died of radiation afterwards as a result of coming in and helping."

A Pale View of Hills is set in contemporary Britain but narrated by a Japanese woman living here and married to an Englishman, using extensive

flashbacks to immediately post-war Nagasaki. It is very oblique in style. Paul Bailey reviewing it in the *TLS* said he could have done with "something as crude as a fact." Ishiguro disagrees. "I have a lot of reservations about that book but I don't think one of them is that I left too much out. The problem with it is it's not confident enough in anything radical it does. It feels to me very much like a first novel where I don't quite have the convictions of the more distinctive things I wished to do. The main criticism I have is that it's not thematically disciplined. I felt this great worry that unless I dragged everything in the book would be empty and boring. It reads rather like a bag of tricks to keep people reading." Although Ishiguro describes it as very much a first novel, "a bit murky and unnecessarily baffling," it was translated into eleven languages and highly acclaimed, winning the 1983 Winifred Holtby Prize. Etsuko, the central character, unable to take control of her own life, retreats into apparently aimless reminiscence. "The idea is there is this obvious gaping gap in the narrative somewhere and there's this rather peculiar story. The reader is supposed to ask: well, why is she telling us about this? After a while it supposed to become clear. This is a way that people operate when they try to face themselves—through other people, through other people's stories."

He doesn't view this obliquity as particularly Japanese. "At that sort of level I think it's fundamental to human nature. I think the Japanese make a kind of style of it. It comes out in their social manner. The Japanese tend to be on the surface more oblique. But it's rather like the middle-class English way of talking. You criticise through innuendoes and hints, you don't actually say, why are you doing that? I think a lot of people from the North of England find southern English manners baffling, for much the same reason people find Japanese manners baffling. There's a great similarity."

An excellent story called "A Family Supper" (a supper possibly consisting of the potentially lethal fugu fish) played on one British prejudice about the Japanese, that they have a predilection for suicide. "What the British make of it is a bit bizarre. They seem to think the Japanese are dying to kill themselves. They seem to pick up on aspects of Japanese culture like that; they seem to find that the most tenable thing about an otherwise rather contradictory culture. They like *kamikaze* and *harakiri*. I suppose in that story I was consciously playing on the expectations of a Western reader. You can trip the reader up by giving out a few omens. Once I set the expectation about the fugu fish up I found I could use that tension and that sense of darkness for my own purposes."

He thinks Paul Scrader's Mishima film only confirmed stereotypes. "There's a reluctance on the part of the West to think of the Japanese as human beings, and this is encouraged by the Japanese themselves who like to think that they're very different from everybody else too. Both sides are to blame for this mystification."

His method of holding back from authorial pointing makes the reader work to see what is happening. This is something he values in his fiction. "There's always a danger—perhaps I expect too much of a reader. I seem to assume that people are going to go through my books very carefully. You have to make a choice somewhere. You have either to address the reader who is going to be reading it carefully or address the person who isn't. If you spell everything out or broadcast everything it's frustrating for the person who is reading it carefully."

Set in Nagasaki in 1948–1950, *An Artist of the Floating World* is the testament of an elderly painting master, Masuji Ono, who turned in the Thirties from painting scenes of "the floating world" (the pleasure districts) to works of militaristic propaganda. Gradually he is coming to terms with his past and the new Americanised Japan, as he learns that his political values have proved as transitory as the values of the "Floating World" itself. William Empson said that "the central function of imaginative literature is to make you realize that other people act on moral convictions different from your own." This is precisely the achievement of Ishiguro's novel. From the first sentence the reader is aware of the excellence of its writing.

In a central passage Ono remembers an aged teacher of painting speaking to him in justification of having dedicated his life to celebrating "the floating world," the beauty of the pleasure houses after dark. "It's one of the central bits of scaffolding in the novel, the idea of the floating world. The old painting master here exemplifies the view of an older school; he wants to put value on the transitory pleasures of the world. That was quite a strong tradition in Japanese art and it's also an attitude to life. You say, well there's nothing you can hold on to in life. You have to realize that the world is full of pleasures that the next day turn out to be illusory, vanished with the morning. The irony of the situation is that the central character of the novel at a certain point in his career feels that this is unsatisfactory. He wants to do something solid. He feels that by doing a different kind of painting which is political and propagandist in implication, he is somehow committing himself to values which aren't transitory, which are somehow solid, which don't vanish with the morning

light. The irony of it is that at the end of the day this is what happens to him nevertheless. The moral climate does a topsy-turvy on him. That's his position at the end, he is still an artist of the floating world which is what he said he had to stop being. That's why it's called *An Artist of the Floating World*."

The question of how one faces up to disillusion, to the feeling of one's own small relevance to the world, lies deep in the novel. "My position is that people have actually to deceive themselves to a certain extent to preserve their dignity. You have to allow people to do that. The other thing is I wanted him to realize his own humble position in the world. A certain kind of reconciliation with the world comes because of that. He realizes the world didn't actually turn on what he did at all, he was just a small ordinary man. In the end if his life has been messed up somewhat he's the only person who really cares about it. I'm very interested in how people preserve their dignity when confronted with the truth about themselves."

I asked him if he felt the Japanese as a whole had come to terms with their past. Reasonably enough he couldn't offer an answer. "I don't know modern Japan well enough." He hasn't been there. "When I write about Japan I write about it as a kind of imaginary world. It's suitable for what I want to write about because it has the flexibility of imagined world. Particularly in the West people aren't likely to say, is it like this really? There's a certain kind of freedom you get as a writer by setting things a) in the past and b) in a different country. I don't want to get too far away from what's historically accepted but I don't have a documentary ambition."

In Japan he has been published by a rather obscure, highbrow publishing house, virtually an academic press. From the reviews there it seems the Japanese also see his books as set in a different world from one that they're familiar with. "Because it is set in 1948. Japan has changed so much since then, much more than Britain has changed. For a long time I dreaded the Japanese publication because I thought people would read it and say, this is ridiculous: this is a world we know and he's misrepresenting it. My position there isn't terribly different from my position here. I'm writing about a world that people don't know about. The modern Japanese don't feel very authoritative about what Japan was like in the Forties. It's a world that has just disappeared."

However it is clear that his concern with the individual's search for integrity has a large-scale counterpart in his fascination with the way Japan as a country has historically so often been able to perform a complete *volte-face* without apparent strain. "The thing about Japanese psychology is they'll

fight like berserk against an enemy as long as that person is identified as an enemy. That seems to be very embedded in the Japanese psyche. But once it has then been established that whoever it is is no longer the enemy but in fact is your conqueror, your new teacher, then the Japanese don't seem to have any kind of mental block about switching completely and becoming very subservient and loyal to this new power. It's a bit like a dog or a horse. It's rather odd and they've done this before in their history. This is the reason they were able to industrialise so rapidly when the rest of the Far East didn't. If you watch Japanese in smaller situations you can understand why they can do that. That is the way the Japanese culture seems to be shaped." The teacher-pupil relationship, which Ishiguro has used in both his novels, is immensely important in Japan. "It's more like a *protégé-patron* relationship. Everybody in society has a patron, who you go to consult over all kinds of matters. It's a crucial feature of Japanese society."

When he came to *An Artist of the Floating World* he felt "perhaps it wasn't so urgent to have crisp plot developing all the way through it. In a way I had to say to myself at a certain point, I'm going to make this book quite boring. You have to say that. There's something about the Western approach to writing that means you have to set out to say, I'm going to write a boring story. It's indicative that when Chekhov wrote such a piece he felt tempted to call it 'A Boring Story.' I can understand that. You're somehow freed from all these Western expectations about having a plot and having a hook. I wanted the thing to be very slow and almost plotless. I wanted it to be a refined boring book," he says, laughing at that.

I wondered why he'd never been back to Japan. "I've just never got round to it. My parents often say if you want to go back we'll pay the airfare, because they feel so guilty about having planted me in this cold country. For a certain number of years I just felt I didn't want to go back—I'm not sure why. Until I was about twenty-one or twenty-two I simply wasn't interested. I wanted to go to the places everybody else wanted to go to, like California, which I did, and not Japan." In 1986 he went to Singapore and Malaysia. "Once again at that point I was wondering if I should go to Japan but I didn't."

If he goes now he would want to stay for some time and is worried about how he might be received. He might not get a good reception. "I'm in a peculiar position. The Japanese are very racist. They're very peculiar about foreigners. They'll treat certain foreigners as guests, politely, at a distance, in a very hospitable way, and they'll expect you to do everything wrong and

behave in an improper manner. If I go there they'll think: here's a Japanese, he doesn't speak Japanese in the correct way, he doesn't address people in the correct language, he does everything wrong. And they'll generally be rather unsympathetic anyway to the idea of a Japanese who went abroad. Japanese who stay away from home too long have always been regarded as rather contaminated. Someone who is completely Westernised as I am has very few excuses in Japan. They'll just think I'm some kind of uncivilized moron."

His family still owns a "rather splendid" house in Nagasaki, similar to one which figures largely in *An Artist of the Floating World*. "It has completely gone to ruin because no-one lives in it anymore. In Nagasaki if you leave a house empty it just goes to ruin, because it's right at the southern part of Japan. It's also halfway up a volcano. It was that kind of old-fashioned samurai house, three storey with a western room at the top—it's your traditional Japanese house, all sliding panels, with this big garden with strange panels, with this big garden with strange vegetation which if you touched you came up in a rash, and lizards and things. I have a very vivid picture of it in my mind. I know where every room is. It's surrounded now by modern Japanese houses. In those days it was isolated, the nice house in the area. Now it's the shabby house in the area, all the neighbours are complaining about it." Remembering this time in Japan is obviously important to him.

"Very vividly this would epitomize a lot of my feelings about Nagasaki and about that point in my life. The house as I remember it is a rather grand and beautiful thing and if I went back the reality would be rather shabby and horrible and in a way that is how I feel about that whole area of my life. It's very powerful to me while it remains a land of speculation, imagination and memory. If I go back to Japan it will probably cease to be that. That doesn't mean to say I don't want to go back. I probably will fairly soon. I used to think it would damage my writing. Now I'm not so sure. Japan has changed so much. The Japan of my past will still be a place apart."

Shorts: Kazuo Ishiguro

Graham Swift / 1989

From *BOMB Magazine* (Fall 1989), pp. 22–23, 29. Reprinted by permission of Graham Swift and *BOMB Magazine*.

Kazuo Ishiguro sprang to international prominence with the publication of his second novel, *An Artist of the Floating World*, which won the 1986 Whitbread Book of the Year prize and was shortlisted for the Booker. It is about a Japanese painter who, having once enjoyed great popular success, finds himself the victim of a revisionist post-war culture, shunned and despised for the incorrect political choices he made in the Thirties. *The Remains of the Day*, out this fall from Knopf, works a similar theme, though this time our narrator is a very English butler called Stevens, who reflects upon the long years of service he gave to a nobleman prominent in British politics in the 1930s.

Stevens is a glorious creation, stiff on the outside, touchingly blind and pathetic within. He agonizes over the question of what makes a "great" butler, what is dignity, and how to acquire the ability to banter. It's a mark of Ishiguro's technical assurance and delicacy of touch that he can softly laugh at his character while at the same time suggesting the deep sadness of his frigid emotional nature. There is, too, at the heart of the novel a quiet examination of British anti-Semitism in the Thirties. Swift talked to Ishiguro in London.

GS: You were born in Japan and came to England when you were five . . . How Japanese would you say you are?
KI: I'm not entirely like English people because I've been brought up by Japanese parents in a Japanese-speaking home. My parents didn't realize that we were going to stay in this country for so long, they felt responsible for keeping me in touch with Japanese values. I do have a distinct background. I think differently, my perspectives are slightly different.

GS: Would you say that the rest of you is English? Do you feel particularly English?
KI: People are not two-thirds one thing and the remainder something else. Temperament, personality, or outlook don't divide quite like that. The bits don't separate clearly. You end up a funny homogeneous mixture. This is something that will become more common in the latter part of the century—people with mixed cultural backgrounds, and mixed racial backgrounds. That's the way the world is going.

GS: You are one of a number of English writers, your contemporaries, who are precisely that: they were born outside England. Do you identify with them? I'm thinking of people like Timothy Mo, Salman Rushdie, Ben Okri. . .
KI: There is a big difference between someone in my position and someone who has come from one of the countries that belonged to the British Empire. There is a very special and very potent relationship between someone brought up in India, with a very powerful notion of Britain as the mother country, and the source of modernity and culture and education.

GS: The experience of empire from the other end. Yet it's true that in two of your novels, which you could loosely call Japanese novels, *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World,* you have dealt with the ruins of empire, Japanese empire. These are post-war novels. Your latest novel, *The Remains of the Day,* is set in the Fifties, in post-war England. It seems to be as concerned as *An Artist of the Floating World* with mistaken allegiances and ideals of an imperial period: pre-war Britain in the Thirties, Japan in the Thirties. There is a similarity there.
KI: I chose these settings for a particular reason: they are potent for my themes. I tend to be attracted to pre-war and post-war settings because I'm interested in this business of values and ideals being tested, and people having to face up to the notion that their ideals weren't quite what they thought they were before the test came. In all three books the Second World War is present.

GS: *The Remains of the Day* has for its central character a butler. One tends to think of butlers in literary association with detective novels or comedy, stage farces, but your butler is a very serious figure indeed. How did you alight on this character?

KI: The butler is a good metaphor for the relationship of very ordinary, small people to power. Most of us aren't given governments to run or coup d'etats to lead. We have to offer up the little services we have perfected to various people: to causes, to employers, to organizations and hope for the best—that we approve of the way it gets used. This is a condition that I want to write about. It struck me that the figure of the butler, the man who serves, someone who is so close and yet so very far from the hub of power would be a useful person to write through. And there's the other reason that you've hinted at . . . It's precisely because the butler has become such a mythical figure in British culture. I've always found that bizarre and amusing. This has got something to do with the fact that I come from a Japanese background. There are certain things that are very exotic to me about Englishness.

GS: Although, you could say that the butler is a figure who leads, by necessity, a very stylized existence. Dignity is enormously important to this character. There is a resemblance with Japan—that feeling of dignity, service, life as a kind of performance. There is a strong echo of *An Artist of the Floating World.* The central character of that novel, Masuji Ono, is also concerned with dignity. Yet Stevens is a much less self-knowing and more pathetic character. He seems to have this terrible blindness about his own experience. The only thing which redeems him is the enormous importance he attaches to dignity. Do you think of dignity as a virtue?
KI: I'm not quite sure what dignity is, you see. This is part of the debate in *The Remains of the Day*. Stevens is obsessed with this thing that he calls dignity. He thinks dignity has to do with not showing your feelings, in fact he thinks dignity has to do with not having feelings.

GS: It's to do with the suppression of feelings.
KI: Yes, being something less than human. He somehow thinks that turning yourself into some animal that will carry out the duties you've been given to such an extent that you don't have feelings, or anything that undermines your professional self, is dignity. People are prone to equate having feelings with weakness. The book debates that notion of dignity—not having emotions—against another concept of dignity. The dignity given to human beings when they have a certain amount of control over their lives. The dignity that democracy gives to ordinary people. In the end, no one can argue that Stevens has been very dignified in one sense: he starts to question

whether there isn't something profoundly undignified about a condition he has rather unthinkingly given all his loyalty to. A cause in which he has no control over the moral value of how his talents are spent.

GS: And that cause proves to be, however honorably it began, a mistaken one.
KI: Yes.

GS: There is of course a whole other area, even more extreme and even more poignant. Stevens seems to have suppressed completely the possibility he once had of a love affair with the former housekeeper, Miss Kenton. He is now taking a rare holiday, to visit her. He hasn't seen her for a long time. He's going back to this crucial moment in the past. Yet, nothing he says actually constitutes an admission of his feelings over the matter. The novel succeeds in a very difficult area. That's to say, you have a character who is articulate and intelligent to a degree, and yet he doesn't seem to have any power of self-analysis or self-recognition. That's very hard to get away with. Did you find it difficult to do?
KI: He ends up saying the sorts of things he does because somewhere deep down he knows which things he has to avoid. He is intelligent enough, in the true sense of the word, to perceive the danger areas, and this controls how his narrative goes. The book is written in the language of self-deception. Why he says certain things, why he brings up certain topics at certain moments, is not random. It's controlled by the things that he doesn't say. That's what motivates the narrative. He is in this painful condition where at some level he does know what's happening, but he hasn't quite brought it to the front. And he has a certain amount of skill in trying to persuade himself that it's not there. He's articulate and intelligent enough to do quite a good self-deception job.

GS: You talk about the language of self-deception. That is a language that is developed with all your main narrator figures. It particularly revolves around the fallibility of memory. Your characters seem to forget and remember at their own convenience or they remember things in the wrong context or they remember one event elided with another: What is involved is a process of conscious or unconscious evasion. How knowing would you say this is?
KI: Knowing on their part?

GS: Yes.
KI: At some level they have to know what they have to avoid and that determines the routes they take through memory, and through the past. There's

no coincidence that they're usually worrying over the past. They're worrying because they sense there isn't something quite right there. But of course memory is this terribly treacherous terrain, the very ambiguities of memory go to feed self-deception. And so quite often, we have situations where the license of the person to keep inventing versions of what happened in the past is rapidly beginning to run out. The results of one's life, the accountability of one's life is beginning to catch up.

GS: After Stevens has visited Miss Kenton, the former housekeeper, he goes to sit by the sea and cries. This is a kind of facing up to himself, a kind of coming clean, but perhaps also a moment of another kind of dignity. There is a dignity that goes with the recognition of loss and failure. A dignity way beyond Stevens's scheme of things, and yet he acquires it.
KI: Yes.

GS: Painfully.
KI: It's the dignity of being human, of being honest. I suppose, with Stevens and with the painter, Ono, in the last book, that would be the appeal I would make on their behalf. Yes, they're often pompous and despicable. They have contributed to rather ugly causes. If there is any plea on their behalf, it is that they have some sense of dignity as human beings, that ultimately there is something heroic about coming to terms with very painful truths about yourself.

GS: You seem to have quite a complicated view of dignity. There is a kind of dignity in the process of writing itself. One could say that your own style has its dignity. I wonder how much you think that for the artist or the writer there is a perennial problem, which is not unlike Stevens's. There is an inherent dignity; grace in art itself; yet, when it becomes involved in big affairs, politics and so on, this can be both an extension of the sphere of art and very ensnaring. Ono, in *An Artist of the Floating World*, has been an artist in a very pure sense. The "floating world" is all about beauty and transience, pure art. It's when he puts his talent in the service of politics, that everything goes wrong in his life. Was he wrong to have done that? Is it bad for art to be put in the service of politics? Is it right that art should concern itself with social and political things?
KI: It's right that artists always have to ask themselves these questions, all the time. A writer, and artists in general, occupy a very particular and crucial role in society. The question isn't "Should they or should they not?" It's always,

"To what extent?" What is appropriate in any given context? I think this changes with time, depending upon what country you're in, or which sector of society you occupy. It's a question that artists and writers have to ask every day of their lives.

Obviously, it isn't good enough to just ponder and sit on the fence forever. There has to come a point when you say, "No matter the imperfection of a particular cause, it has to be supported because the alternatives are disastrous." The difficulty is judging when. There is something about the act of writing novels in particular, which makes it appropriate to actually defer the moment of commitment to quite a late point. The nature of what a novel is means that it's very unequipped for front line campaigning. If you take issue with certain legislation that's being debated, you're better off writing letters to the press, writing articles in the media . . . The strength of the novel is that it gets read at a deeper level; it gets read over a long stretch of time by generations with a future. There is something about the form of a novel that makes it appropriate to political debate at a more fundamental, deeper, more universal level. I've been involved in certain campaigns about homelessness but I've never brought any of that into my novel writing.

GS: Are you writing another novel?
KI: I'm trying to get going. I've got books out of the library. It takes me a long, long time to start writing the actual drafts. The actual writing of the words, I can do in under a year, but the background work takes a long time. Getting myself familiar with the territory I'm going to enter I have to more or less know what my themes are, what the emphasis will be in the book, I have to know about the characters . . .

GS: Before you even put pen to paper.
KI: Yes, I'm a very cautious writer in that sense. I can't do the business of shoving a blank piece of paper in the typewriter and having a brain-storming session to see what comes out. I have to have a very clear map next to me.

GS: Do you find that in practice you actually adhere to your plan?
KI: Yes. More and more. Less so for my first novel. One of the lessons I tried to teach myself between my first and second novel was thematic discipline. However attractive a certain plot development, or idea may be that you stumble across in the process of writing, if it's not going to serve the overall

architecture, you must leave it, and keep pursuing what you wish to pursue. I had the experience in my first novel of having certain things upstage the subjects I really wanted to explore. But now I'm beginning to crave the brilliant messiness that certain writers can achieve through, I suspect, not sticking to their map.

GS: From following their noses.
KI: I have these two god-like figures in my reading experience: Chekhov and Dostoevsky. So far, in my writing career, I've aspired more to the Chekhov: the spare and the precise, the carefully, controlled tone. But I do sometimes envy the utter mess, the chaos of Dostoevsky. He does reach some things that you can't reach in any other way than by doing that.

GS: You can't reach it by a plan.
KI: Yes, there is something in that messiness itself that has great value. Life is messy. I sometimes wonder, should books be so neat, well-formed? Is it praise to say that book is beautifully structured? Is it a criticism to say that bits of the book don't hang together?

GS: I think it's a matter of how it stays or doesn't stay with the reader.
KI: I feel like a change. There's another side of my writing self that I need to explore: the messy, chaotic, undisciplined side. The undignified side.

Ishiguro in Toronto

Suanne Kelman / 1989

From *The Brick Reader* (1991), ed. by Linda Spalding and Michael Ondaatje.
Reprinted by permission of Kazuo Ishiguro.

Kazuo Ishiguro won the 1989 Booker Prize for *The Remains of the Day*, a novel narrated by an aging British butler on vacation, reminiscing about his life in service to an aristocrat who flirted with Naziism before World War II.

Like all three of Ishiguro's novels, it is a monologue by a most untrustworthy and emotionally repressed narrator. The Booker judges praised it in these terms: "*The Remains of the Day* renders with humour and pathos a memorable character and explores the large, vexed themes of class, tradition and duty. It was narrowly preferred but universally admired." The prissy tone of this endorsement eerily echoes the butler's own pompous style, which makes *The Remains of the Day* Ishiguro's first funny book.

His first novel, *A Pale View of Hills*, traces the memories of a Japanese woman, now widowed, being visited by her daughter from her second marriage—to an Englishman—at her home in an English village. A daughter from an earlier marriage in Japan has killed herself some years before.

The narrator's memories return obsessively to her post-war years in Nagasaki, and her friendship with another Japanese woman trapped in a Madame Butterfly relationship with an American. The theme of the suicide or murder of a child runs through the book, evoked by a newspaper item, a dangling rope, or the nightmare story of a madwoman who drowned her baby daughter.

Ishiguro's second novel, *An Artist of the Floating World*, picks up a subplot from *A Pale View of Hills*. Its narrator, a painter named Masuji Ono, has wholeheartedly supported the rise of militarism and nationalism in Japan in the thirties, to the point of denouncing a rebellious former student to the authorities. The student has spent the war in prison.

In the post-war period, the unrepentant artist is an embarrassment to his remaining family and an obstacle to his second daughter's marriage. Like all

of Ishiguro's work to date, *An Artist of the Floating World* is the attempt of an often-deluded character to reconstruct the past, in deep but repressed pain, and with wildly varying degrees of honesty.

Ishiguro has also written television scripts, and has just completed a screenplay for a movie. Called *The Saddest Music in the World*, it is the story of a folk-music contest to determine which tradition can claim the most tragic melody.

Three weeks before he won the Booker, Ishiguro was interviewed in Toronto by Suanne Kelman.

Kelman: *A Pale View of Hills*, your first novel, is the story of a Japanese woman drifting into an intricate and rather sad, even sinister, relationship with the West. Where did that come from?

Ishiguro: When I was writing it I thought the book was about things like the overturning of social values and parental responsibility. But I think there was a much more emotional motivation behind it that had to do with my personal history. I was born in Japan, in Nagasaki, and I went with my parents to England in 1960 when I was five. It was supposed to be a temporary stay, but it kept getting extended. Almost without deciding to do so, the family remained in England. But as a child, I grew up thinking I was going to return to Japan any day. And so I had this very powerfully imagined country in my head. And by the time I had more or less grown up, I realized that this Japan that existed in my head, and which was very important to me, was a country that no longer existed in reality, if it ever had. I also became aware that as the years passed this place was just fading away in my head, too.

At the point in my life there was a real need to tack it down, to reconstruct this world that I had the most powerful emotional incentives to imagine. I think that had a lot to do with why I turned to novel-writing. It explains something I didn't understand at the time, which was that I wasn't interested in doing research in the conventional sense to fill out my picture of Japan. I was almost defensive about that. I had a Japan inside my head, which I needed to transcribe as accurately as possible.

Kelman: *An Artist of the Floating World* seems very much to come out of the first book, in that one of the characters from *A Pale View of Hills* seems suddenly to step on to centre stage. Was that how the second book did start?

Ishiguro: Yes, largely. I think one of the problems about being an inexperienced novelist is that it's difficult to control your work. I was very conscious of certain traps that people fall into when they write their first novel, being too autobiographical or having a certain lack of focus. So I made a big effort to try to be quite clear about what I was trying to do in the book. But nevertheless I found thematic discipline very difficult at that stage. In the first book, a lot of things that I thought were just going to be subplots took over. I would have what seemed to be a good idea, for that moment, for that page, and I would just put it down without thinking where it was going to take me. And before I knew it, I had almost subverted my real intentions. When I finished it, I thought: "Well, the aspect of this book that is most important to me is this bit that has ended up as a subplot," which is a story about this old teacher, whose career has coincided to a certain extent with the rise of militarism in Japan before World War II, and who, after the war, in retirement, finds himself in the awkward position of having to reassess his life's work. I thought I would like to explore that strand much more thoroughly.

It's also to do with the nervousness of the first novelist. I was nervous about fundamental things, that I wouldn't have enough to fill enough pages that it would be called a novel, or that I would lose the reader's attention. I had this rather neurotic urge to throw in everything to keep the thing going. And for the second book I calmed down a little and if ideas—however intrinsically appealing—weren't relevant to the overall design, I developed the discipline to say "No, we don't want this."

Kelman: You seem to enjoy tormenting the reader, dangling some unspecified, upsetting incident for ten or twenty pages, until finally the reader finds out what on earth happened.
Ishiguro: The point is, particularly in the last two books, I haven't structured the novels around a linear plot line. And this does give me tremendous freedom in some senses; I can compose much more freely. Lots of other factors come into why one episode should follow another, if you remove this rather didactic thing, this spine called a plot, which dictates that *y* should follow *x*. But the problem is keeping up some kind of momentum. So I suppose that's just a technical device for providing a certain kind of suspense and structure. It's also important for the reader to consider various things the character is remembering in the light of why he is remembering them, why he is juxtaposing them one alongside another. I wouldn't want to suggest that there's anything particularly deep about this. It's my equivalent to suspense, what's going to happen next.

Kelman: After *A Pale View of Hills*, it seems almost as if you develop a distaste for dramatic things happening, at least on stage. You use some quite Gothic effects in *A Pale View of Hills*—morbid and frightening images of murdered children. But in *An Artist of the Floating World*, the hero never confronts the pupil he's wronged. The pupil never takes revenge. When people die, we hear about it months later, when it's been leeched of all emotion.
Ishiguro: It's to do with what you're interested in as a writer, and certainly for those two books I was interested in the justification process that takes place inside people's minds when they try to come to terms with certain things about their past. I wasn't terribly interested in things *happening*. I was interested in all the ways in which people like the painter in *An Artist of the Floating World* or the butler in *The Remains of the Day* fool themselves or hide from themselves. The events, if you like, are to do with that: one side of the person demanding a certain honesty, and the other side demanding some kind of preservation from the truth. And that's the drama that's going on rather than any kind of more plotty things.

Kelman: You said that you don't like to do much research for the novels.
Ishiguro: I do research of a sort. But you see, I think that the research that a novelist does is quite different from what is normally called research. I feel I have to know the fictional landscape in which my novel takes place very well. That's the landscape I have to research, not any actual chunk of history or real country. For *The Remains of the Day* I read accounts written by servants, just to give me props from which I could invent. Similarly, I read a lot of political commentary from that time to try and get a feel for the climate of the debates that were going on. I feel more comfortable if I have some background knowledge and then I know how much licence to give myself.

Kelman: It's hard for someone like me to judge if your Japan is imaginary or not, because it doesn't seem any more jarring than, say, Tanizaki's Japan. But I knew your Britain was imaginary. It seemed a strange Britain for someone of your age to imagine—this strange sort of Wodehouse life.
Ishiguro: That was a conscious decision. I wished to set this book in a mythical landscape, which to a certain extent resembled that mythical version of

England that is peddled in the nostalgia industry at the moment. This idea of England, this green, pleasant place of leafy lanes and grand country houses and butlers and tea on the lawn, cricket—this vision of England that actually does play a large role in the political imaginations of a lot of people, not just British people but people around the world.

I think these imaginative landscapes are very important. I felt it was a perfectly reasonable mission on my part to set out to slightly redefine that mythical, cozy England, to say that there is a shadowy side to it. In a way I wanted to rewrite P. G. Wodehouse with a serious political dimension.

Kelman: The great difference is that the butler in P. G. Wodehouse eventually goes downstairs and rolls up his sleeves and flirts with the kitchen maid. That's part of the *Upstairs, Downstairs* vision: that the servants eventually go off duty. I'm interested in the absolute purity of Stevens: a man who wants to lose himself utterly in the dignity of his public person.
Ishiguro: Well, he's a kind of metaphor for something, and as such he's a kind of exaggeration. He's a kind of grotesque. All right, as you say, he wishes to deny this human aspect of himself. It's a story of a man who, misguidedly in my opinion, is so ambitious to achieve a certain ideal that he does so at terrible cost. He actually loses a part of himself that is crucial: that is to say, his capacity to love. That stereotypical figure of the English butler, which is known all round the world, I thought would serve well as some kind of emblem of this terrible fear of the emotional in one's self, and the tendency to equate having feelings with weakness. And this terrible struggle to deny that emotional side that can love and that can suffer. The butler was also a metaphor for me for the relationship ordinary people have to political power. He has these two clear metaphorical functions.

Kelman: In all three books, the characters are very repressed people. Your books seem to me largely built around the things people cannot say to one another, around silences.
Ishiguro: Yes. I think in the last book in particular that has become a much more conscious theme. In the first two books, that just came out stylistically. As you say, the books often work by what is not said as much as by what is said. And the intensity of certain feelings is conveyed by how they are left out, rather than by how they are overtly expressed. I think in the third book, I was trying to address that condition itself as part of the theme.

Kelman: How are your books received in Japan?
Ishiguro: There's a lot of curiosity about me as a person. There isn't very much interest in my books. The third one may actually have a larger readership, paradoxically, because it is set in the West. The Japanese aren't terribly interested in reading books set in post-war Japan, written by some guy who hasn't lived there in years. This is stuff that they went through many years ago, and they're into something else now.

But they're fascinated with me as a phenomenon. They still like to think there's something unique about being Japanese, and they find the idea that someone could be racially Japanese but partially something else terribly threatening.

Kelman: I don't think there's anything in what we've said so far that would suggest that parts of *The Remains of the Day* are very funny.
Ishiguro: This is the thing that continually distresses me, the tone in which the thing is discussed, which suggests that it's a boring, heavy, depressing work. I'm glad we mentioned people like Wodehouse before, because to a certain extent it was, as I said, an attempt to invade that territory, and that territory includes a light touch and humour.

I suppose there's something funny about people who don't have a sense of humour. Predominantly I think for me what is funny is the same thing as what is tragic. There are a few farce sequences in the book, but the humour that interests me is the humour that arises from the ridiculous and yet sad condition that he is in.

Kelman: Do you read much Japanese literature?
Ishiguro: Only in translation. I can't read *kanji* characters. I'm often as baffled as the average western reader who's been brought up in the western traditions of literature.

People like Mishima and Tanizaki are the people who are most accessible to the West, and that's because they were partly themselves very much influenced by western literature and thought. But traditionalists like Kawabata, who was the only Japanese Nobel Prize winner for literature, I find terribly difficult. We were talking earlier about not depending on plot too much; Kawabata's stuff is sometimes virtually plotless. Obviously one is being asked to appreciate something entirely different. I don't feel that I'm really understanding what he's up to.

Japanese movies are another matter. Almost by definition, Japanese film directors were quite concerned about western influence. Although, having said that, I think Japanese cinema grew up very much in a tradition of its own, alongside the overwhelming Hollywood tradition, and indeed went on to teach Hollywood many things. Particularly directors like Kurosawa and Ozu became people that Hollywood learned from. Some of my very favourite films of all times are Japanese ones.

Kelman: One of the things I noticed in the first two books is the doubling effect, that characters slide in and out of identities—which of two characters actually said this, which child are we watching at this time? In the third book, it becomes time: On which occasion did she say this? There are always echoes and reflections.
Ishiguro: I don't think anything terribly profound is being said there. I'm trying to capture the texture of memory. I need to keep reminding people that the flashbacks aren't just a clinical, technical means of conveying things that happened in the past. This is somebody turning over certain memories, in the light of his current emotional condition. I like blurred edges around these events, so you're not quite certain if they really happened and you're not quite certain to what extent the narrator is deliberately colouring them. And it's convenient. You move from one situation to another by having a character say: "Well, maybe it wasn't that, and maybe it was this." It's just a very easy way of getting from scene *a* to scene *b*.

Kelman: Is there anything you've been dying to be asked—about one of the books or your whole career—that no one's asked?
Ishiguro: No. I do interviews because this is the way publishing has got, now, and that all seems to be part and parcel of my job. But I don't feel an overwhelming need to go around talking about my books. I spend a lot of time getting my books to say just so much. A part of me resists coming back on the stage and saying: "Oh, by the way, during this bit you're supposed to be thinking this."

Kelman: You don't really like it.
Ishiguro: I don't dislike it. Well, I think there's a very interesting side to it, that you do gain quite an insight into your work because of the nature of the questions that are asked. The cumulative effect of a number of people asking questions, if they all zoom in on a particular area that you yourself as a writer hadn't considered to be particularly fertile or contentious, does teach you something about the way the book is being read.

To give an example, with this last book I hadn't been that conscious of, say, the nature of the narrative voice until the book came out, and this was what a lot of the questioning was about, the nature of this narrative voice. Where did you get this funny voice?

The other thing that's interesting is to go to different countries. Quite often there's a difference in emphasis from country to country, and that tells you something about the different respective cultures, because of course the book is the same. It's just being read in different ways.

Kelman: Can you give me an example?
Ishiguro: When I went to Germany with *An Artist of the Floating World*, the questions were overwhelmingly about fascism. They want to make comparisons between the way the Japanese have faced up to their war experience and their militarist/fascist experience and the way Germany has. I don't particularly enjoy talking about my books in Germany because they don't seem to be read as fiction. They seem to be read as a further contribution to some debate.

In England the effect is almost the antithesis. People have not paid much attention to the ideas and just treated it as an exotic kind of little thing, and drawn comparisons to Japanese painting and brushwork, carp splashing about in still ponds. I've had every kind of Japanese cliché phrase—even Sumo wrestling.

Kelman: As you're going through the bookselling machine, lots of people like me are asking you fairly impertinent questions about your life. Does that bother you?
Ishiguro: I've got quite good at not going beyond a certain point. But somehow if you write a book, people think they have a licence to ask you some very intimate things about your past or your feelings about your family. I think a more disturbing tendency at the moment is that a lot of people do interviews and the journalists go away and write up a very scathing, vicious piece.

Kelman: Has that happened to you?
Ishiguro: Not exactly. At the moment I'm somebody who has not been attacked. I'm probably peculiar in not having many enemies in London literary

circles. There was a time not so long ago when writers were rather shabby, unglamorous people, who didn't earn very much money. The only people who wanted to interview them were serious literary types. For some reason the perception of the writer has changed, and they've become glamorous people. They've lost the right, along with politicians and actors and other public figures, to be treated with gentleness and respect.

That worries me, because publicity is good for literature in that it sells books and gets books read, but if the tone in which books are sold and talked about actually deteriorates, then we're probably better off not having this publicity at all. It'll get the books to the wrong constituency and the books will be read in the wrong way. It may start to affect the way writers write. I think this is an unhealthy trend.

Now I've often heard writers complain about their time being invaded by doing promotion, spending all their time at literary parties and things. It's very difficult to get yourself into an imaginary world when you keep having to do this. You can actually, if you're not careful, end up becoming a professional conference-attender, a person who goes around talking about books. You can damage whatever got you writing in the first place.

Kelman: Do you think you'll ever write a novel that's not a monologue?
Ishiguro: Oh, I hope so. I think it's important for writers to move on. I think there's a particular danger that if you've been praised by critics for being able to do *x*, *y*, *z* well, you can be overcome by a terrible cowardice about leaving territories *x*, *y*, and *z*. I haven't quite decided about the monologue thing, but I do feel I would like to write a book with a different kind of voice, a different tone. I'm at the beginning of my career. I don't want to be forever writing books about old people looking back at their lives in this rather laconic, understated kind of voice.

There are two authors whom I revere. Chekhov on the one hand and Dostoevsky on the other. The books I've written up till now, the last two especially I think, are probably written under the influence of Chekhov. But I think sometimes I would like to write something very messy and jagged and brilliantly imperfect, in the way Dostoevsky has done. That's a side of my writing I'd like to explore further in the future.

Kelman: Do you think you'll ever write a novel in which a character addresses his or her father in the second person rather than the third?

Ishiguro: It depends on what kind of characters we're dealing with. In the Japanese context, it is absolutely natural that people would address their fathers in the third person, there's nothing unusually repressed about that. That's a very western viewpoint to think there's anything terribly odd about this. If you're asking me if there will be a sudden change of tone, will I write a book about an Italian family who scream at each other, I don't know if I would. Obviously what you write comes out of fairly deep things, those things you've inherited as a person. I've grown up with two cultures behind me, the Japanese middle class, or more strictly speaking the Japanese samurai background, and the British middle-class background: Two cultures that both, in a very pronounced way, put a high premium on what in a British context might be called a stiff upper lip.

It's not just a case of stoicism, it's a different language, a different way of conveying emotion. I enjoy creating effects, emotional intensity and tensions in my writing through what is left out. Or exploring language that hides, rather than language that gropes after something just beyond its diction. Although I enjoy reading the latter kind. There have been some brilliant writers through our history who have tried to bend language around, to go for some things that are just beyond the reach of normal language, everyday language. There's something exciting about that.

But, of course, language also has this other function, which is to conceal and suppress, to deceive one's self and to deceive others. So far, I suppose, I've been involved in exploring that language, particularly the language of self-deception.

The Novelist in Today's World: A Conversation

Kazuo Ishiguro and Kenzaburo Oe / 1989

From *Boundary 2*, vol. 18 (Fall 1991). Reprinted by permission of Duke University Press and Kazuo Ishiguro.

Kazuo Ishiguro was born in 1954 in Japan. He went to England at the age of five when his oceanographer father was invited to participate in a British government research project. He attended British schools and graduated from the University of Kent, where he majored in English literature. He later studied creative writing at the University of East Anglia graduate school. His first novel, *A Pale View of Hills* (London: Faber & Faber, 1982) was awarded the Royal Society of Literature Prize, and his second, *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), received the Whitbread Book of the Year Award. His latest book, *The Remains of the Day*, won the 1989 Booker Prize, Britain's most prestigious literary award. Oe Kenzaburo, born in 1935 in Shikoku, is a leading contemporary novelist in Japan. Among his best known works are *Man'ei gannen no futtoboru* [A Football Game in the First Year of Man'ei] (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1973; translated as *The Silent Cry* by John Bester, Kodansha International, 1974), *Do jidai gemu* [Contemporary Games] (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1979) and *Atarashii hito yo mezameyo* [Wake Up to a New Life] (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1983).

This conversation was held in November 1989 during Mr. Ishiguro's first return visit to Japan in thirty years on the Japan Foundation Short-Term Visitors Program and was originally published in the *Japan Foundation Newsletter*, vol. 17, no. 4.

Oe: We know that your father is a marine scientist, but exactly what branch of marine science does he specialize in?

Ishiguro: He's an oceanographer, so it's not so much marine science. He's studied wave patterns. It has to do with the tides and waves. His speciality in

the 1960s was relevant to the British government's research on the North Sea, an area they were very interested in at that time because of the oil.

Oe: But reading your novel *An Artist of the Floating World*, I was struck by the excellent descriptions of life in Japan, of Japanese buildings and landscapes. I would like to ask where you acquired this basic knowledge about your Japanese landscapes and characters, and to what extent they were a product of your imagination.

Ishiguro: Well, I think the Japan that exists in the book is very much my own personal, imaginary Japan. This may have a lot to do with my personal history. When my family moved from Nagasaki to England, it was originally intended to be only a temporary stay, perhaps one year or maybe two years. And so as a small child, I was taken away from people I knew, like my grandparents and my friends. And I was led to expect that I would return to Japan. But the family kept extending the stay. All the way through my childhood, I couldn't forget Japan, because I had to prepare myself for returning to it.

So I grew up with a very strong image in my head of this other country, a very important other country to which I had a strong emotional tie. My parents tried to continue some sort of education for me that would prepare me for returning to Japan. So I received various books and magazines, these sort of things. Of course, I didn't know Japan, because I didn't come here. But in England I was all the time building up this picture in my head, an imaginary Japan, if you like.

And I think when I reached the age of perhaps twenty-three or twenty-four I realized that this Japan, which was very precious to me, actually existed only in my own imagination, partly because the real Japan had changed greatly between 1960 and later on. I realized that it was a place of my own childhood, and I could never return to this particular Japan. And so I think one of the real reasons why I turned to writing novels was because I wished to re-create this Japan—put together all these memories, and all these imaginary ideas I had about this landscape which I called Japan. I wanted to make it safe, preserve it in a book, before it faded away from my memory altogether. So when I wrote, say, *The Artist of the Floating World*, I wasn't terribly interested in researching history books. I very much wanted to put down onto paper this particular idea of Japan that I had in my own mind, and in a way I didn't really care if my fictional world didn't correspond to a historical reality. I very much feel that as a writer of fiction that is what I'm supposed

to do—I'm supposed to invent my own world, rather than copying things down from the surface of reality.

Oe: That seems to be a very concrete illustration of the way a writer's imagination takes shape. In my book *The Silent Cry*, I wrote about Shikoku. I was born and grew up in a mountain village on that island. When I was eighteen, I went to the University of Tokyo to study French literature. As a result, I found myself completely cut off from my village, both culturally and geographically. Around that time my grandmother died, and my mother was getting older. The legends and traditions and folklore of my village were being lost. Meanwhile, here I was in Tokyo, imagining and trying to remember those things. The act of trying to remember and the act of creating began to overlap. And that is the reason why I began to write novels. I tried to write them using the methods of French literature that I had studied. Reading your novels, and thinking about the history of English literature, I get the strong impression that, in terms of method, you are a novelist at the very forefront of English literary history.

I was interested in the way that *An Artist of the Floating World* begins with a description of a large building, and how we enter the world of the novel through that building. In the same way, *The Remains of the Day* begins with a description of a large mansion. As a way to enter the novel, it overlaps to a great extent with the earlier book. It was easy for me to see how the two books—*An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day*—are connected, and how one develops the other. Reading the two books together and observing this overlapping, I thought to myself that here was certainly a great novelist.

Ishiguro: That's very flattering. I'm very interested to hear some of the background about your being cut off from your past in Shikoku. Are you saying that the urge to remember or stay in touch with your past was actually crucial in making you become a writer?

Oe: I have a book that is just coming out in French translation from Gallimard: *M/T et l'historie des merveilles de la forêt.* The "M" is for matriarch and the "T" is for trickster. A while ago I wrote a book called *Contemporary Games*, about the myths of the village and the universe of the village. As I wrote *M/T et l'histoire*, I listened once more to my grandmother talking about cosmology, and wrote it down just as it was, in her own words. In fact, the history of my village is already lost. Almost everyone has forgotten it. For example, there is a place where dozens of people were killed in a riot, but no one remembers that. My family, and especially my grandmother, remembered those things very well, and told me about them. Until I was fourteen, I grew up in the village, listening to these stories. Then I moved to the city and was completely cut off, while they were all dying. So now the only person who remembers the central part of the myths of that village is me. This is what I want to write about now. I want to write a book that will sum up, or finish, all of my work up to now. These things will be the main theme of the book, and right now they are what is most important to me.

Ishiguro: I hope the English translation will be appearing very shortly. I look forward very much to reading that. Reading *The Silent Cry*, and I think it is an extraordinary work, one of the reasons why I think it's such a special work is that it's often difficult for a writer to get a certain distance from very personal events in his life that have touched and disturbed him. This book seems to be that kind of book, but at the same time you somehow seem to have kept control, to have maintained an artistic discipline, so that it actually becomes a work of art that has meaning for everybody. It's not simply about Mr. Oe. It strikes me that one of the ways in which you managed that is a certain kind of humor, a unique tone. It's very different from the kind of humor found in most of Western literature, which is mainly based on jokes. Everything has this peculiar sense of humor, which is always on the verge of tragedy—a very dark humor. This is one of the ways in which you seem to have been able to keep under control events that must be very close to you. Mr. Oe the artist has always managed to keep in control of the work. But do you think this sort of humor is something unique to your own writing or have you got it from a larger Japanese tradition?

Oe: It's interesting that you should ask that, because one of the things I feel is unique about your work is your control over the distance from the periods and characters in your work. All of your books have a distinct tone, even though they are connected on a deeper level. So I appreciate your comments about the tone and distance in my works.

I think that the problem of humor, which you just brought up, is a very important one. This is one of the points in which I differ from Mishima Yukio. Mishima is very strongly rooted in the traditions of Japanese literature. Moreover, they are the traditions of the center—Tokyo or Kyoto—urban traditions. I come from a more peripheral tradition, that of a very provincial

corner of the island of Shikoku. It's an extremely strange place, with a long history of maltreatment—out there beyond the reach of culture. I think my humor is the humor of the people who live in that place. Mishima had a great deal of confidence in his humor, so perhaps it's accurate to say that his humor was the humor of the center, whereas my humor is the humor of the periphery.

Ishiguro: I would be quite interested to hear what you feel about Mishima. I'm often asked about Mishima in England—all the time, by journalists. They expect me to be an authority on Mishima because of my Japanese background. Mishima is very well known in England, or generally in the West, largely because of the way he died. But also my suspicion is that the image of Mishima in the West confirms certain stereotypical images of Japanese people for the West. And this is partly why I think he is much easier for Western audiences. He fits certain characteristics. Of course, committing *seppuku* is one of the cliches. He was politically very extreme. The problem is the whole image of Mishima in the West hasn't helped people there form an intelligent approach to Japanese culture and Japanese people. It has helped people perhaps to remain locked in certain prejudices and very superficial, stereotypical images of what Japanese people are like. Most people seem to regard Mishima as a typical Japanese, in some sort of way. Of course, I never quite know what to say in response to this, because I know very little about Mishima, and very little about modern Japan. But that is certainly the impression that I get—in the West he is being used to confirm some rather negative stereotypes. I wonder what you think about Mishima and the way he died, what that means for Japanese people, and what that means for a distinguished author such as yourself.

Oe: The observations you just made about the reception of Mishima in Europe are accurate. Mishima's entire life, certainly including his death by *seppuku*, was a kind of performance designed to present the image of an archetypal Japanese. Moreover, the image was not the kind that arises spontaneously from a Japanese mentality. It was the superficial image of a Japanese as seen from a European point of view, a fantasy. Mishima acted out that image just as it was. He created himself exactly in accordance with it. That was the way he lived, and that was the way he died. Professor Edward Said uses the word *orientalism* to refer to the impression held by Europeans of the Orient. He insists that orientalism is a view held by Europeans, and has nothing to do with the people who actually live in the Orient. But Mishima

thought the opposite. He said that your image of the Japanese is me. I think he wanted to show something by living and dying in exact accordance with the image. That was the kind of man he was and why he gained literary glory in Europe and the world.

But what in fact happened is that Mishima presented a false image. As a result, the conception of Japanese people held by most Europeans has Mishima at the one pole and people like Akio Morita, chairman of Sony, at the other pole. In my opinion, both poles are mistaken. But if this is the case, where can we look for a more accurate image of the Japanese people? Going back to your book *An Artist of the Floating World*, at the very end there is a scene with a number of young Japanese, and the artist, who is looking at them in a warmhearted way. I think that people like those young Japanese really do live in Japan, and that they are the ones who have brought prosperity to the Japanese economy. Of course, Mishima had nothing to say about them. And writers like me, who take a negative view of Japan, have not captured them either. So I think that your novel exerted a good influence on perceptions of Japan in Europe, a kind of antidote to the image of Mishima.

I have a question I wanted to ask. Reading your work and talking to you, one does not at all get the impression of someone born in Japan. In the case of Conrad, one of my favorite authors—to me, he is a kind of ideal novelist—one gets the strong impression that he is a genuinely English author, as well as a true European. On the day when you received the Booker Prize, there were reports in the Japanese mass media of your remarks on Salman Rushdie.[1] There were many people who were moved by those remarks, including myself. We felt that this person was a genuinely European novelist, a genuinely European personality, that this was real European intelligence.

The Japanese themselves want to be perceived as peaceful and gentle, like Japanese art—landscape paintings and so on. They don't want to be seen as economic imperialists or military invaders. They would like others to think of flower paintings, something quiet and beautiful, when they think of Japan. When your books first began to appear in Japan, that was how they were introduced. You were described as a very quiet and peaceful author, and, therefore, a very Japanese author. But from the first, I doubted that. I felt that this was an author with a tough intelligence. Your style always involves a

1. In his acceptance speech of the Booker Prize, Ishiguro said: "It would be improper for us not to remember Salman Rushdie this evening and think about the alarming situation and plight in which he finds himself."

double structure, with two or more interwined elements. And in fact, that has been demonstrated again with each of your books. I also felt that this kind of strength was not very Japanese, that this person was, rather, from England.

Ishiguro: Well, I don't try to be a quiet writer. That's really a question of technique more than anything else. There's a surface quietness to my books—there aren't a lot of people getting murdered or anything like that. But for me, they're not quiet books, because they're books that deal with things that disturb me the most and questions that worry me the most. They're anything but quiet to me.

On the question of being a European writer, I think that partly this has been the effect of my not knowing Japan very well. I was forced to write in a more international way. If I had continuously returned to this country after I left in 1960 and was more familiar with Japan all the way through my growing up, I think perhaps I would have felt a greater responsibility to represent Japanese people in this way or that way, to be a kind of spokesman, if you like, of Japan in England. But as things worked out, I didn't return. This is my first return to this country in thirty years. I was very aware that I had very little knowledge of modern Japan. But still I was writing books set in Japan, or supposedly set in Japan. My very lack of authority and lack of knowledge about Japan, I think, forced me into a position of using my imagination, and also of thinking of myself as a kind of homeless writer. I had no obvious social role, because I wasn't a very English Englishman, and I wasn't a very Japanese Japanese either.

And so I had no clear role, no society or country to speak for or write about. Nobody's history seemed to be my history. And I think this did push me necessarily into trying to write in an international way. What I started to do was to use history. I would search through history books in the way that a film director might search for locations for a script he has already written. I would look for moments in history that would best serve my purposes, or what I wanted to write about. I was conscious that I wasn't so interested in the history per se, that I was using British history or Japanese history to illustrate something that was preoccupying me. I think this made me a kind of writer that didn't actually belong. I didn't have a strong emotional tie with either Japanese history or British history, so I could just use it to serve my own personal purposes.

I wonder, Mr. Oe, do you feel responsible for how Japanese people are perceived abroad? When you are writing your books, are you conscious of an

international audience, and what this will do to Western peoples' perceptions of Japan? Or do you not think about things like that?

Oe: I was interviewed once by a German television station. The interviewer had translated one of my books into German. He asked me whether it was very important to me to be translated into German. I said no, and a deathly silence fell over the studio. The reason why I said no is simply that I write my books for Japanese readers, rather than for foreign. Moreover, the Japanese readers I have in mind are a limited group. The people I wrote for are people of my own generation, people who have had the same experiences as myself. So when I go abroad, or am translated abroad or criticized abroad, I feel rather indifferent about it. The responsibilities I feel are to Japanese readers, people who are living together with me in the midst of this environment.

Speaking as a reader, foreign literature is very important to me. William Blake is important to me. I've written one book based on Blake, and one based on Malcolm Lowry. Another book was about a Dante specialist who lives out in the country. With respect to Dante, I have been influenced in various ways by scholars from your country. So in that sense I have been much influenced by foreign literature. I read your books in English, for example. Still, I think that when I write my books, I write them for Japanese readers. I feel a certain sense of responsibility that I just can't break out of, even though I feel that there is probably something mistaken about that attitude. Naturally, I believe that a real novelist is international, like yourself. In your case, of course, I think that in addition to being international you are also very English. In *The Remains of the Day* you discovered viewpoints from which it is possible to describe both English people and Americans well. The viewpoint is completely different from that of a Japanese person or a Chinese person. From a certain viewpoint, it is possible to see an English person well, and also an American person. And that viewpoint has produced your style. I think this sort of author is genuinely European, international in an essential way. So it might be that I am a more Japanese author than Mishima. I hope, myself, that younger Japanese authors will be able to discover a more international standpoint or outlook.

Ishiguro: There never seems to be a clear relationship between the audience an author thinks he is addressing and the audience that, in fact, the author does come to address. Many of the great classical writers, whether the ancient Greeks or whoever, had no idea they would eventually address people from

cultures very, very different to themselves. Possibly Plato was writing simply for the people who were living in Athens at the time, but of course we read him many, many years later, in very different cultures. I sometimes worry that writers, being conscious of addressing an international audience, could actually have quite a reverse effect, that something very important in literature might actually die because people water down their artistic instincts. It's almost like a mass-marketing exercise.

Particularly because this is a time when American culture, or what you might call Anglo-American culture, is pervasive all around the world—in Asia, Latin America, and so forth—it seems to be growing and growing. Perhaps it is very important that writers don't worry at all about this question of audience. You, yourself, Mr. Oe, may think you are only writing for your own generation, for Japanese. But your books are read by lots of people outside that group. People want to translate your work. It seems that as the years go by, your reputation grows, and in different parts of the world. This shows that someone can be addressing a small group of people, but if that work is powerful and sincere, it has a universal, international audience.

On the other hand, I know that there are many writers who are consciously trying to write the novel that is all ready for translation. And of course nobody particularly wants to read these things, because they have lost some sort of initial strength that comes from the intensity of addressing a small group. Perhaps whether a writer is international or not is something that the writer cannot control. It's almost accidental. But often, I think, the deeper the work, and the deeper the truth of the work, the more likely it is to be international, whether the author is consciously addressing a small group of people or a large number of people. Do you think younger writers in Japan are worried about this question of how international they are?

Oe: In last evening's edition of the *Asahi Shimbun*, there was an article about how a translation of a work by the novelist Murakami Haruki is being read widely in New York. The article quoted a review in the *New York Times* to the effect that it was now possible to imagine a literature of the Pacific Rim.

For the past week I have been thinking about just what sort of novelist you are. My conclusion is that, rather than being an English author or a European author, you are an author who writes in English. In terms of furnishing the materials for literature, there is a tremendous power in the English language. Somehow it seems that the initiative in world literature has been with English,

especially in the field of the novel. As long as he has the English language, an author can leave England and still remain a great writer. Lawrence was that way, and Laurence Durrell, also E. M. Forster. I felt that by thinking of you in this way, as a writer of English, I had got hold of something essential. By way of comparison, Murakami Haruki writes in Japanese, but his writing is not really Japanese. If you translate it into American English, it can be read very naturally in New York. I suspect that this sort of style is not really Japanese literature, nor is it really English literature. But as a matter of fact, a young Japanese author is being read widely in the United States, and I think that this is a good sign for the future of Japanese culture. A young Japanese writer has achieved something that I was never able to achieve, nor Mishima, nor Abe Kobo.

Ishiguro: I think I, too, share these same worries. I attended a lecture by the European intellectual George Steiner, who is at Cambridge and very well known in Britain. I think you are familiar with many of his ideas. One of his constant worries is about all the cultures of the world disappearing because they are swallowed up by this ever-growing, large blanket called Anglo-American culture. He is very disturbed by the fact that scientific papers in China, and certainly here in Japan, are often written originally in English, because they have to be presented at conferences where only English is understood—that in the communist countries the young people listen to the latest Western rock music. He is very afraid of a certain kind of death of culture, because this bland, colorless, huge blanket called Anglo-Americanism is spreading around the world. In order to survive, people have to sacrifice many things that make their culture unique and, in fact, make their art and culture mean something, and, instead, contribute to this meaningless blanket, this strange thing that is conquering the world.

I think that is quite an important thing to be concerned about. Certainly my generation of writers in Britain have perhaps not worried about that kind of thing enough. We have perhaps been concerned about the opposite problem, of not being international enough. I think this is certainly a problem that we have to think about. I think it will be very strange if we all contribute to the same sort of culture, if we're all addressing the same sort of audience. We could all end up like international television. A lot of television programs are now rather superficial, but they're international. It would be sad if literature and serious art were to go the same way—to the lowest common denominator, in order to appear international.

There is a sense among younger writers in England that England is not an important enough country anymore. The older generation of writers assumed

that Britain was a very important country, and so if you wrote about Britain and British problems, it would automatically be of global significance. The younger generation of writers in England are very aware of the fact that this is no longer true, that England is now rather like a little, provincial town in the world. Some younger British writers have a kind of inferiority complex, that is, they have to consciously make an effort to address international themes, because if they simply write about life in Britain, nobody is going to be interested. Perhaps that feeling doesn't exist in the United States or Japan, in that there is a strong sense that these two societies are now somehow at the center of the world, and the twenty-first century is going to be somehow dominated by these two powers. But certainly, living in England, I feel that same pressure, that I have to be international. Otherwise, I'm going to end up in the same position as Danish or Swedish writers, of being very peripheral, because a lot of the great questions of today are passing Britain by. In a way, I think young Japanese authors don't need to feel that sort of inferiority, just because of the way history is moving.

Oe: Of course, I have nothing against the fact that Japan is becoming rich because of radios and automobiles. I don't own an automobile, but I do have a radio. But I do think that the state of the economy and the state of literature are unrelated. Instead, I think Japanese authors should clearly realize that Japanese literature is very peripheral. When a peripheral literature attempts to become a central literature, one of the things that happen is that it tries to become exotic. I think Mishima tried to create a literature of the exotic. But I believe that attempt was mistaken. Paradoxically, it may be possible for Japanese writers to play a certain role in world literature if they express Japanese concerns in a literature of the periphery.

I am familiar with George Steiner. He seems to be very fond of the idea that things are dying—first it was tragedy, and now it is culture. I think that the image of Anglo-American culture as a huge blanket spreading across the world is one of his best. I can't really agree with what you said about England being a peripheral nation in terms of the world economy and international relations. I believe that in terms of culture, England still occupies a very important place in the world, and will continue to do so in the future. Looking forward to the twenty-first century, it doesn't seem to me that Japan will become a cultural center just because of its economic strength. I don't believe that American cultural spokesmen will have a very great deal of power, or that Soviet cultural spokesmen will be very powerful. I think that in the twenty-first century,

statements by isolated writers and scholars from small countries that appear to be in the periphery will play a very important role in world culture. One example is the novelist Italo Calvino, who recently died a tragic death. He was scheduled to deliver the Mellon Lectures at Harvard University and was working on the manuscript for those lectures until he died on the day before he was to leave for the United States. The manuscript has been translated into English as *Six Memoirs for the Next Millennium*. Reading it, I think that this work by a novelist from Italy, a country that is economically and politically on the periphery, contains things that will be of central importance in the next century. Another example is the Czech novelist Milan Kundera, now living in exile in France. But reading, for example, the Israel Address, which is found at the end of his book, *The Art of the Novel*, I think we will find the most central expression of how a writer will have to live and act today. So I think what writers from Japan must learn is that they need to think about how they can contribute to world culture as representatives of a small, but cultured, nation in Asia. Moreover, they should do so without the help of businessmen or politicians. Simply as writers, they will have to open up, on their own, a road to England, or a road to France.

Ishiguro: I would like to add to my earlier remarks. It wasn't simply because Britain was declining as an economic power that I was suggesting writers in Britain had a sense they were peripheral. I don't think it is really so much in connection with economic power. In fact, I think, it is in some ways quite the reverse.

Writers from Britain and, to a certain extent, writers from Germany and France—and I myself have had this experience—go to an international writers' conference and somehow feel inferior, compared to writers who come from places like Africa, or Eastern Europe, or Latin America, in the sense that in many of the great intellectual battles between liberty and authoritarian regimes, or between communism and capitalism, or between the Third World and the Industrialized World, the front line somehow seems to be in these countries, and there seems to be a more clearly defined role for writers like Kundera or some of the African writers. Writers from all the Eastern European countries always seem to have some sort of clear political role to play. This may well be a mistaken assumption, but it's an easy assumption that comes over a lot of us who come from the more safe countries, if you like, the safe, prosperous countries like Britain, or West Germany, or France, although the situation has suddenly changed for the West Germans.

Somehow, in terms of the really important things happening in the century, in historical terms, if we are writing from a position like Britain, or Sweden, or France in the latter part of the twentieth century, we are writing from somewhere very far away from where the main events are taking place, and we somehow lack the natural authority of writers who are living in Czechoslovakia, or East Germany, or Africa, or India, or Israel, or the Arab countries. And I think this is the reason for this inferiority complex, rather than simply that Britain is not quite as important an economic power as it used to be. Of course, it is still a very powerful economic force. But just in terms of the great intellectual debates that seem to be central to the latter part of the twentieth century, there is the feeling that perhaps we in England are in the wrong place to view the big battles.

Perhaps it's a good thing that British writers feel they have to travel, or that at least in their imaginations they would have to travel. So I think the younger generation of British writers, much more than the older generation, tends to write novels that are not set in Britain, or at least not set in their time. They will look back through history for a time when Britain itself was in crisis, and so the war figures quite large. Or they have to use their imaginations to create completely imaginary landscapes. This kind of thing is happening more and more, and I think it comes out of this idea that somehow England is far away from something important happening politically and socially in the world. Perhaps writers in Japan and the United States do not feel it quite so much, because there is a sense that somehow, quite aside from the economic question, Japan and America are at the forefront of something crucial that is about to happen in the world. I think that has a certain effect on how writers view their work, where they go for material to feed their imaginations.

Oe: When I myself go abroad to participate in various conferences, it is always simply as an individual writer. I think that the things I have talked about have been more or less unrelated to Japan's economic growth. My sense of Japan is that it is still a peripheral country, and that in spite of its economic power, it is still not living up to its international role, particularly in Asia. Thinking back, I think I may share some of the responsibility for this state of affairs, so I talk about that and the sort of things that a writer, as writer, might be able to do to compensate.

For some reason, Japanese writers tend to stay away from international writers' conferences. Up to now, at least, there have not been many authors

who have gone to speak out about Japan's place in the world, about the contradictions felt by Japanese writers in the midst of economic prosperity, about the things which trouble them deeply. So, for my part, I am trying to do that, little by little. Japan has many very capable businessmen and politicians, but as a novelist, I want to speak out internationally about things that they never mention. And I think it is meaningful for writers from abroad, especially young writers like yourself, to come to Japan to look closely at this country and to meet Japanese intellectuals. I hope this will lead to a deeper understanding of things such as the difficult role played by Japanese intellectuals amid material prosperity, and to cultural encounters at a genuinely substantial level. So in that sense, welcome to Japan!

Ishiguro: Thank you very much. It was an interesting conversation.

An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro

Allan Vorda and Kim Herzinger / 1990

From *Mississippi Review*, no. 20, pp. 131–54. Reprinted by permission of Allan Vorda and Kim Herzinger.

Kazuo Ishiguro was born in Nagasaki, Japan, in 1954 and moved to Britain in 1960. He attended the University of Kent at Canterbury and the University of East Anglia. To date he has published three novels, all of which have received literary awards: *A Pale View of Hills* won the Winifred Holtby Prize of the Royal Society of Literature; *An Artist of the Floating World* won the 1986 Whitbread Book of the Year Award; and *The Remains of the Day* won the Booker Prize—Britain's top literary award.

The following interview was conducted by Allan Vorda at his home in Sugar Land, Texas, on April 2, 1990. Mr. Ishiguro was in town as a guest speaker for the literary workshops which were held during the Houston International Festival.

Kim Herzinger: The year before last, just before you went back to Japan for the first time since you left at the age of six, you were somewhat worried that the Japanese would expect you to know a great deal more about the culture and the country than you actually did. Were your fears realized?
Kazuo Ishiguro: Not really. It's partly because they knew I was coming. I had a very kind of closeted journey to Japan. I was invited by the Japanese Foundation, which is part of the government, so there was always an escort hanging around. In fact, there was far more media interest in me than I had anticipated. I caused a great stir in the press—not because they were particularly interested in me as a literary figure—but because I touched a *strange nerve* from the social aspect. Japan is, at the moment and perhaps for the first time, facing the idea that it cannot remain an homogeneous society.

This question about immigrants from Southeast Asia as well as a greater number of Western people living in Japan has started up a process. They now have to start thinking about what it means to be Japanese and what sort of country Japan might be. This has suddenly become a live wire issue. This idea that somebody who is racially Japanese and looks very Japanese could go to England and have lost his Japaneseness in some ways is at the same time fascinating and I think rather threatening. So there was all this interest in what kind of person I was and what messages I could bring and what the West thought about Japan. They somehow thought that I was somebody they could actually ask. So I found myself put in that sort of false territory there.

Allan Vorda: Did you speak Japanese?
KI: No, I spoke English all the time and I was advised to do so. Really just to avoid this confusion—that was my way of saying I'm not a regular Japanese guy. My Japanese isn't good enough anyway to speak correctly. I could make myself understood, but in Japan that is not enough. There are about seven or eight different ways to say the same thing, depending on how you perceive the status of the person you are speaking to, vis-a-vis yourself. To get this kind of thing even slightly wrong produces a tremendous offense. It's a terribly hierarchy-conscious society, although in a curious way it is a classless society. It means people aren't worrying about whether they are upper class or middle class or working class. They are worrying about what number they are on the ladder.

AV: Did the people there like the answers they heard from you or did your answers increase their xenophobia?
KI: I avoided giving any clear cut answers, but I think just my very being is a kind of embodiment of the whole issue.

A lot of Japanese are starting properly to travel for the first time, and by this I don't mean just as tourists. Business and international trade means that they are spending more time abroad. Of course, they have children who are growing up abroad. This is something that some people say is good and others say is horrifying because their Japaneseness is going to become dissipated. The fear is that these people and their children will come back to Japan having lost something, such as eating with chopsticks, which is part of the cultural tradition.

A lot of the younger Japanese, particularly in Tokyo, know very little about things that people in the West consider to be traditionally Japanese. They don't even know how to put on the kimono. (I suppose I would be a good example since I don't know.) If you do it the wrong way around—the left on the inside or the right on the outside or whichever way it is—it's a terrible blunder because one way you only do to a corpse; living people have it the other way and I never can remember which way it is. But what was interesting is a lot of the young Japanese don't know because they don't wear kimonos and they don't know a lot of the basic things. The younger kids, particularly in Tokyo, are kind of like Western kids in that sense. It is a kind of baffling, weird thing from a bygone era.

They also eat meat all the time. I was shocked at how tall they were as well. Anyone under thirty is six or seven inches taller on average than anyone over thirty. This is partly due to eating American junk food, but, of course, they may not live as long.

The whole trip was interesting and I think it's the way the world is going now since we're becoming much more international. America has always had this melting pot reputation and now Britain has to face-up to the questions of multi-culturists. The Japanese are beginning to realize it's going to be their turn since Japan is the last large industrialized country that hasn't faced this problem.

AV: You stated in *The New York Times Book Review* that, "Publicity for me has to a large extent been fighting the urge to be stereotyped by people." Isn't this partly due to your ethnicity as well as your first two novels being set in Japan?

KI: There is a kind of paradox about my books being set in Japan and whether this stereotypes me or not. In Britain, around the time when I published my first novel, the climate had actually turned towards a great deal of interest in writers who wrote books set in that particular setting. I think there was a very peculiar thing going on in Great Britain at that time. I tend to think if I didn't have a Japanese name and if I hadn't written books at that stage set in Japan, it would have taken me years longer to get the kind of attention and sales that I got in England with my first two books.

What happened in Britain—certainly during the time when I was at university—contemporary fiction was, I won't say dead, but it seemed to be the preserve of a strata of a very small British society. We all had this image of contemporary British novels being written by middle-aged women for middle-aged middle-class women.

Some of them are good and some of them are appalling, but that wasn't one of the exciting things that was happening when I was growing up. Anyone interested in the creative arts was interested in theatre. There was a whole explosion with a kind of radical theatre. Rock music, cinema, and even television—because we have quite serious arts television in Great Britain—were the kind of things that everyone was talking about while the novel had a kind of sleepy, provincial, cozy, inward looking kind of image and no one was interested in it.

Around 1979 and 1980 things changed very, very rapidly. There was a whole new generation of publishers and a whole new generation of journalists who came of age at that time and they desperately wanted to find a new generation of writers to rediscover the British novel. I think there was something wider going on in English society at that time too. There was an awareness that Britain was a more international place, a more cosmopolitan place, but it wasn't the center of the world. It was kind of a slightly peripheral, albeit still quite wealthy, country. It started to be aware of its place within the context of the whole international scene. In the early 1980s there was an explosion of tremendous interest in literature that suddenly appeared almost overnight. This occurred in foreign language literature with people like Garcia Marquez, Milan Kundera and Mario Vargas Llosa, who became very trendy people. At the same time there was a whole generation of younger British writers who often had racial backgrounds that were not the typical white Anglo-Saxon. Even some of the straight English writers were also using settings or themes that tended to be international or historical. So there definitely was this atmosphere where people were looking for this young, exotic—although exotic may be a somewhat unkind word—writer with an international flavor. I was very fortunate to have come along at exactly the right time. It was one of the few times in the recent history of British arts in which it was an actual plus to have a funny foreign name and to be writing about funny foreign places. The British were suddenly congratulating themselves for having lost their provincialism at last.

The big milestone was the Booker Prize going to Salman Rushdie in 1981 for *Midnight's Children*. He had previously been a completely unknown writer. That was a really symbolic moment and then everyone was suddenly looking for other Rushdies. It so happened that around this time I brought out *A Pale View of Hills*. Usually first novels disappear, as you know, without

a trace. Yet I received a lot of attention, got lots of coverage, and did a lot of interviews. I know why this was. It was because I had this Japanese face and this Japanese name and it was what was being covered at the time.

I tend to think I got a very easy ride from the critics. I subsequently have won literary prizes with each book which is very important in Britain career-wise. It's one of the things that helps you climb the ladder. All these things sort of happened to me and I think it greatly helped that I was identified as this kind of person.

Yet after a while this became very restricting and the very things that helped me in the first place started to frustrate me as an artist and as a serious writer. I don't want to be confined by these things even though they were quite helpful publicity-wise.

KH: Well, by now in Britain there is a rather large and active community of extremely important and active writers who come from, or often write about, cultures quite different from the English, Irish, Scots, and Welsh. I'm thinking of V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, William Boyd, Doris Lessing, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, and even transplanted Americans like Paul Theroux, David Plante, and Russell Hoban. Do you find yourself grouped with them often? Do you mind it? Do you resist it? Do you think such a grouping is of any use in coming to grips with your work?

KI: Like any writer I resist being put in a group. The group you mentioned there is quite an eclectic one. I'm usually put in a much more narrow group—usually with Rushdie and a writer called Timothy Mo who probably isn't that well known in America. He's a Chinese-British writer who is quite prominent in Britain and has been nominated for the Booker Prize twice. He hasn't won it yet.

I write so differently than someone like Rushdie. My style is almost the antithesis of Rushdie or Mo. Their writing tends to have these quirks where it explodes in all kinds of directions. Rushdie's language always seems to be reaching out—to express meaning that can't usually be expressed through normal language. Just structurally his books have this terrific energy. They just grow in every direction at once and he doesn't particularly care if the branches lead nowhere. He'll let it grow anyway and leave it there and that's the way he writes. I think he is a powerful and considerable writer.

I respect Rushdie's writing enormously, but as a writer I think I'm almost the antithesis. The language I use tends to be the sort that actually suppresses meaning and tries to hide away meaning rather than chase after something

just beyond the reach of words. I'm interested in the way words hide meaning. I suppose I like to have a spare, tight structure because I don't like to have this improvised feeling remain in my work. From a literary point of view, I can't see anything that links me with someone like Salman Rushdie or Timothy Mo.

I think if we can generalize at all about these writers, I think there is something that unites most of the writers that you have mentioned, especially the younger writers of Britain at the moment. There is something different about them, if you compare that group with the older generation of writers of Britain. The one possible valid thing that unites the younger group is the consciousness that Britain is not the center of the universe. There was a time, and I think this is when Britain thought it had this dominant role in the world for a long time, that Britain thought it was the head of this huge empire. I think for a long time it was supposed you could just write about British issues and about British life and it would automatically be of global significance since people all around the world would be interested. British writers didn't have to consciously start thinking about the interests of people outside Britain because whatever concerned them was by definition of international interest.

I think there was this gray period—because literary habits take a long time to die—that the British finally, both intellectually and consciously, had accepted that the empire had gone. No longer did they have this dominant central place in the world. I think perhaps the styles of writing and the assumptions of writing took a while to catch up with that and I think this was rather a dull period in English writing. The writers were writing things in which nobody was interested in since it meant nothing to anyone outside of Britain, yet they carried on with the assumption that Britain was the center of the world. In fact, it was this that turned it into this provincial little country.

I think the younger generation of writers not only realized that, but are now suffering from a kind of inferiority complex. There's a great sense that the front line where the great clashes of ideologies were happening was elsewhere. So whether you are looking at communism and capitalism clashing or the Third World and the Industrialized World clashing or whatever it is—people have this idea if you're actually based in Britain and British life is what you know—then you have to make some sort of leap. Either you go out there physically and start searching around as V. S. Naipaul and Paul Theroux did or you have to use your imagination. It's much more normal for the younger generation of British writers, and apart from the people you mentioned

I would also include Julian Barnes and Ian McEwan, that they will very often not write books in the contemporary British setting they live in. They will search far and wide in their imaginations for mythical settings or historical settings. For example, one of McEwan's recent novels is set in the Cold War period of Berlin. This is not atypical of the differences that separate the younger generation from the older generation of writers.

KH: Americans like to believe that English-language literature somehow became theirs after World War II; we pay some lip-service to Golding, Lessing, Amis, Fowles, Larkin, Heaney, Hughes, Powell, Murdoch, and the rest, but not much. In fact, I would say that Americans half feel that English literature never quite recovered from the deaths of Joyce and Woolf and the war itself. How do you see yourself, and other young contemporary British writers, in terms of the twentieth-century tradition of British writing?
KI: What I just said previously raises questions about style and technique as well as setting and theme. If you happen to actually live in a country that you think won't actually provide a broad enough setting to address what you see as the really crucial issues of the age, that inevitably means you start moving away from straight realism.

If you happen to be, let's say, living in East Germany at the moment, perhaps there's no overwhelming reason to write realism. I think there's a natural instinct to write realism. It takes much more to start thinking of other ways to write. It's when you are actually *stuck on the margins*. Then you start to become conscious that you are stuck on the margins and the things that you know intimately on that concrete documentary level just won't do. Yet on the other hand you realize you won't have the same authority as someone who lives in Eastern Europe, or someone who lives in Africa, or the Soviet Union, or America to write about the places that you think are rather central to the things you would like to talk about. What can you do? You know about English life and the texture of English society, but it's something you feel you can't use that well. So you start to actually move away from realism. You have to start looking for other ways in which to work. I think here you start to move, not so much into out-and-out fantasy, but you start to create a slightly more fabulous world. You start to use the landscape that you do know in a metaphorical way. Or you start to create out-and-out fantastic landscapes. Perhaps Doris Lessing got caught up in that when she went off in her science fiction venture.

It may well be that Americans are going through some of the stages that British writers are used to going through because American society is so central to the world community. What are the international themes that are of interest to everybody? There is no need to ask this question consciously. Yet in some ways America is almost exempt from having to ask that question or perhaps it thinks it is. Perhaps it shouldn't be exempt. I think people can write about American society and American life and it will be of interest to people in Kuala Lumpur or the Philippines because American culture has a broad appeal. It has gotten to the point that some people say American culture is invading or taking over everywhere you go in the world. Thus, a lot of people are trying to stop it, but a lot of people are bringing it in. It's irrelevant. It's very difficult to think of any point in the globe—or any society in the world today—where people shouldn't have a valued interest in American culture.

For the time being, just because of the way things are, I think American writers find themselves in this position—that they can write in a way that at other times might seem as very inward-looking and parochial. Just by virtue of America's cultural position in the context of international culture American writers are going to be relevant. So writers who haven't tried to be of great interest to people all over the world end up being so, sometimes precisely because they're so inward-looking and unconscious of the world beyond, that they reveal so much about where a lot of these influences are coming from. I think there was a time when British writers were in this position. Perhaps American writers need to be aware of a time when it will no longer be the case for them.

AV: Do you see your prose style having elements of the more traditional twentieth-century British writers such as W. Somerset Maugham, E. M. Forster, Evelyn Waugh, and Joyce Cary? Are these writers with whom you feel you have common ground?
KI: Not really. Most of them I haven't even read. (Laughter.) With *The Remains of the Day* it's like a pastiche where I've tried to create a mythical England. Sometimes it looks like or has the tone of a very English book, but actually I'm using that as a kind of shock tactic of this relatively young person with a Japanese name and a Japanese face who produces this extra-English novel or, perhaps I should say, a super-English novel. *It's more English than English*. Yet I think there's a big difference from the tones of the world in *The Remains of the Day* and the worlds created by those writers you mentioned because in my case there is an ironic distance.

AV: Maybe I misread you somewhat. You are saying that readers have to get past the realism in order to reach—as Barth or Borges or Marquez have termed it—the irrealistic or fabulist world. This is more of your intent with *The Remains of the Day* than just writing a traditional British novel?
KI: Absolutely. I think it's almost impossible now to write a kind of traditional British novel without being aware of the various ironies. The kind of England that I create in *The Remains of the Day* is not an England that I believe ever existed. I've not attempted to reproduce, in an historically accurate way, some past period. What I'm trying to do there, and I think this is perhaps much easier for British people to understand than perhaps people abroad, is to actually rework a particular myth about a certain kind of mythical England. I think there is this very strong idea that exists in England at the moment, about an England where people lived in the not so distant past, that conformed to various stereotypical images. That is to say, an England with sleepy, beautiful villages with very polite people and butlers and people taking tea on the lawn.

Now at the moment, particularly in Britain, there is an enormous nostalgia industry going on with coffee table books, television programs, and even some tour agencies who are trying to recapture this kind of old England. The mythical landscape of this sort of England, to a large degree, is harmless nostalgia for a time that didn't exist. The other side of this, however, is that it is used as a political tool—much as the American Western myth is used. It's used as a way of bashing anybody who tries to spoil this "Garden of Eden." This can be brought out by the left or right, but usually it is the political right who say England was this beautiful place before the trade unions tried to make it more egalitarian or before the immigrants started to come or before the promiscuous age of the '60s came and ruined everything.

I actually think it is one of the important jobs of the novelist to actually tackle and rework myths. I think it's a very valid ground on which a novelist should do his work. I've deliberately created a world which at first resembles that of those writers such as P. G. Wodehouse. I then start to undermine this myth and use it in a slightly twisted and different way.

I was asking you earlier on, and this is a question I ask a lot of American people who know American literature, about the genre of the Western myth. It's always puzzled me that serious writers have not to a greater extent tried to rework that myth because it seems to me a nation's myth is the way a country dreams. It is part of the country's fabulized memory and it seems to me to be

a very valid task for the artist to try to figure out what that myth is and if they should actually rework or undermine that myth. It has happened in the cinema as far as the Western is concerned, but when I ask this question people don't seem to be able to offer many serious literary works that go into that area.

To a certain extent, I suppose I was trying to do a similar thing with the English myth. I'd have to say that my overall aim wasn't confined to British lessons for British people because it's a mythical landscape which is supposed to work at a metaphorical level. *The Remains of the Day* is a kind of parable. Yet this is a problem I've always had as a writer throughout my three books. I think if there is something I really struggle with as a writer, whenever I try to think of a new book, it is this whole question about how to make a particular setting actually take off into the realm of metaphors so that people don't think it is just about Japan or Britain, but also give it that sort of ability to take off as metaphor and parable. Because ultimately I'm not that interested in saying things about specific societies; and, if I were, I think I'd prefer to do it through nonfiction and follow all the proper disciplines such as to actually produce evidence and argument. I wouldn't do it by creating emotional manipulation.

AV: Perhaps it is less interesting to do it through nonfiction because it is less imaginative. I guess that is one of the joys of writing fiction.
KI: Yes—yes—yes, but—yes! I think one of the joys of fiction is that you are actually saying things that are universal and not just about Great Britain or America or whatever. It can be about America or Britain, but I think when fiction really takes off it is because you can actually start to see how it is relevant to all other kinds of contexts and how there is a universal streak to these things. I always have this real problem because, on the one hand, you have to create the setting in your novel that feels firm enough, as concrete enough, for people to be able to find their way around it. On the other hand, if you make it too concrete, and too tied down to something that might exist in reality, that fictional work doesn't take off at that metaphorical level and people start saying, "Oh, that's what it was like in Japan at a certain time in Ishiguro's book or he's saying something about Britain in the 1930s." So for me it is something that I feel I haven't quite come to terms with yet, but I'm trying to find some territory, somewhere between straight realism and that kind of out-and-out fabulism, where I can create a world that isn't going to alienate or baffle readers in a way that a completely fantastic world would. But, at the same time, it can actually

prompt readers to say that this isn't documentary or this isn't history or this isn't journalism. I'm asking you to look at this world that I've created as a reflection of a world that all kinds of people live in. It's the movement away from straight realism that is actually the real challenge. You get that wrong and you could lose everything whereby no one identifies with your characters or they don't care what happens in this funny, weird, bizarre, world. I just wanted to somehow move it away so it's just a couple of stages from straight realism in order to let it take off with that metaphorical level. I think I've come closer to doing that in *The Remains of the Day* than I did with the two Japanese novels, but I still feel this is a challenge I have to meet.

AV: Your prose style is a joy to read. For example, on page twenty-seven of *The Remains of the Day* you write: "I was then brought up to this room, in which, at that point of the day, the sun was lighting up the floral pattern of the wallpaper quite agreeably." And shortly thereafter, the butler Stevens thinks that the "greatness" of Britain paradoxically comes from "the lack of obvious drama or spectacle that sets the beauty of our land apart." Can the same analogy be made to your writing style?
KI: When Stevens says that about the British landscape he is also saying something about himself. He thinks beauty and greatness lie in being able to be this kind of cold, frozen, butler who isn't demonstrative and who hides emotions in much the way he's saying that the British landscape does with its surface calm: the ability to actually keep down turmoil and emotion. He thinks this is what gives both butlers and the British landscape beauty and dignity. And, of course, that viewpoint is the one that actually crumbles during the course of Stevens's journey.

To a large extent, when I wrote *The Remains of the Day*, that was the first time I started to become very conscious of my own style. And, of course, quite rightly, these references that Stevens makes also refer to my own style. I think what happened was this. My first two novels I just wrote these sentences without really thinking about style. I was just writing in what I thought was the clearest way possible. Then I started to read review after review which talked about my understated or clipped style. It was the reviewers and the critics who actually pointed this out to me, my style seemed to be unusually calm with all this kind of strange turmoil expressed underneath the calm. I actually started to ask myself, "Where does this style come from then?" It's not something I manufactured. I had to face the possibility that this was actually indeed

something to do with me. It's my natural voice. In *The Remains of the Day*, for the first time, I started to question to what extent that was a good or bad thing from the human point of view regarding this whole business about the suppression of emotion.

Perhaps this was actually revealed by this style, by this inner voice, that I produced in my first two books. To a certain extent, *The Remains of the Day* actually tackles on a thematic level the implications of that kind of style. Of course, Stevens's first person narrative is written in that style, but of course his whole life is led in that style. And in the book I try to explore to what extent that it is indeed dignified and to what extent it is a form of cowardice: a way of actually hiding from what is perhaps the scariest arena in life, which is the emotional arena. It is the first book I've written in which I was actually conscious of my own style and to a certain extent tried to figure out what it is and why it's like that and where it's coming from.

KH: Despite a comparatively paltry audience in the United States, there is feeling that you, along with Ian McEwan, William Boyd, Martin Amis, Salman Rushdie, Julian Barnes, Graham Swift, and a few others—plus the international success of *Granta*—are leading an energetic new wave in English fiction. How does it seem to you?
KI: It is very hard for me to assess what is going on in America because I have just visited, but it does surprise me the extent to which the Atlantic does seem to be this huge gap between the two literary cultures. There are household names here that aren't even available in the bookshelves in Britain and vice versa.

When I came over here to do my tour with Knopf in November, I discovered that there were these people who are literary giants. For instance, consider Ann Beattie, who I don't think is readily available on the bookshelves in England. You might be able to track down some old copy of an Ann Beattie book, but you could talk to a lot of literary journalists in London and they would not have heard of her. They would not have heard of Russell Banks. On the other hand, Raymond Carver has become very well respected in England, as has Richard Ford. I would say these two writers have broken through to significant respect and readership in Britain.

All the time I'm coming across books here that I realize are very well known over here, but quite often these names mean very little to me. I've been given a book by Pete Dexter called *Paris Trout* which I think is quite a

well known book here and I've noticed he's won the National Book Award. Personally, I had a hell of a time breaking through here. I don't know why there should be this huge gap, but I think it just points to the fact that—even though we share the same language—the literary cultures are so different.

The other factor has to do with the actual publishing industries because so much of publishing has to do with contacts and literary politics. I think one of the real weaknesses of the system as it operates at the moment is that there is a tendency toward insularity. If you start operating any contact games then the mediocre domestic talent is always going to get promoted over more interesting stuff from abroad.

KH: Since you studied American literature at university, were there any American writers that influenced your work? I hear that you think Hemingway, for instance, wrote great titles, but that perhaps the books that followed were a bit of a letdown.
KI: I think Hemingway did write marvelous titles. I like Hemingway's early work, but I find some of his later stuff pretty mediocre, almost embarrassingly so, but his standard of title writing remained high right to the end. I think *Across the River and Into the Trees* is a marvelous title, but the discrepancy between the quality of the title and the book is one of the greatest discrepancies I've come across in world literature. It is staggering someone who could write a title like that could write such an appalling book, but he did write some fine stuff early on.

With American writers I tend to like the older guys from the nineteenth century such as Mark Twain. I think *Huckleberry Finn* is a very beautiful book with a real liveliness to the language and the vernacular is very exciting. *Moby Dick* is a crazy book, yet very interesting. I like Edgar Allan Poe, who raises some very interesting question about literature as a whole.

AV: What about such contemporary American writers such as Pynchon, Gass, and Barth?
KI: These are all people that I should say that we don't really read in England. Pynchon is read . . . well, I don't know . . . he is bought. Usually, the only book of his that anyone has read is *The Crying of Lot 49* because it's short. A lot of people possess *Gravity's Rainbow* and *V.*, but I know very few people who have gotten over one-third of the way through. It remains to be seen if people will finish *Vineland* in England, but people are buying him.

Pynchon may very well be a very important writer, but I've only read *The Crying of Lot 49*, so I'm not in a position to say. From what I've read he is a little too over-intellectualized for me. I suppose one of these days I should tackle his big novels.

AV: I can't think of one writer in America who gets more critical attention than Pynchon.
KI: Perhaps he is a great writer or it could be because there will always be a certain kind of writer who is good for academics.

AV: Can you name one thing that separates American literature from British literature?
KI: One feature of your literature scene here that we don't have in Britain and generally in Europe is the creative writing industry. I think that is one big enormous difference in the two literary cultures. It's probably true to say, and I've heard it often said, that you can't find a single American writer today of any significance who hasn't in some way been directly touched by the creative writing world, either as teacher or student. Even someone who kept away from its principles is going to be affected by it indirectly, because so much of the criticism and so many of the opinions of his fellow writers are going to be touched by it. I think this is something that would certainly make me nervous if I were living in a literary culture where the role of the universities and faculties who taught creative writing began to have that sort of dominant influence.

I'm not actually suggesting that the Thomas Pynchon Phenomenon is something closely related to this because I'm not in a position to comment on him. All I would say is that I would want to assess quite carefully what the role of the creative writing faculties actually is within the whole literary culture because, whether you like it or not, American literature is going a certain direction because of this and I would want to determine if the influence were benign or whether it was actually leading us up a garden path. The thing I fear from the creative writing industry and universities in general is that people elevate priorities that I would not consider to be terrifically important. They'll elevate issues to some kind of status like the nature of fiction or some rather cerebral intellectual ideas. Such issues become esteemed in that kind of environment because, after all, that is what that kind of environment celebrates. But, for me, while the nature of fiction or fictionality are things that

writers might need to be concerned with to get on with their work, I don't believe that the nature of fiction is one of the burning issues of the late twentieth century. It's not one of the things I want to turn to novels and art to find out about. I think reading Ford and Carver for me is a kind of an antidote really to those over-intellectualized or self-conscious literary creations that almost seem to be created for the professor down the corridor to decipher. Carver and Ford seem to write about life in the way that is profound as well as at the technical level which I think is in a different league from a lot of these people who are just trying to show off or make comments about their literary techniques. The technique applied by Ford or Carver is one at the highest level and to the point that perhaps it's not that obvious. I think they say great things about the emotional experience of life.

Minimalism is not something that is discussed very much in Britain. Short stories haven't really caught on in Britain recently. You can bring out a volume of short stories and you know that only about one-third of the people read it, as opposed to the number of people who read a novel that you have written. For some reason the British don't get into short stories.

KH: To what extent has Japanese fiction influenced your work? If we look around for writers who sound a bit like Ishiguro, it would seem that Tanizaki—especially his cool precision and delicate touch (at least in translation)—is closer to you than anybody else.
KI: Tanizaki wrote in various different styles and a lot of his books I wouldn't describe as cool or delicate. I think the book that is best known in the West is one called *The Makioka Sisters*. It is really like a Western family saga. It is one of those stately, long books like Henry James, Edith Wharton, Theodore Dreiser, or George Eliot would have written. It's about this rich merchant family where nothing terribly dramatic ever happens, but it follows the different family members through a period of social change. I think a lot of people think that Tanizaki always writes like that, but he also writes kind of weird, kinky, perverted stuff.

AV: What book would you be referring to?
KI: *The Secret History of the Lord of Musashi* which is about a medieval lord who, the first time he gets sexually turned on, is wandering around a battlefield shortly after a battle and he sees these severed heads. I think that night he peeks through a hole and sees some women dressing the severed heads of fallen clan members and he starts to get sexually turned on.

AV: I'm sure Freud would have had a good time with this.
KI: It gets even weirder because the thing that really turns him on is a particular head that has a nose missing. So when he becomes a powerful lord later on he has a real sexual craving for severed heads with missing noses. It gets really funny because there is a particular guy that he takes a liking to and he really wants to see this guy without a nose and so he keeps trying to arrange it so that his nose will get cut off but it never quite works. This poor guy doesn't know what the hell is going on so every few weeks he loses an ear or something happens to him, or somebody is after him, but he doesn't know why. There is this weird scene where he gets his servant to impersonate a severed head without a nose while he is making love to one of his concubines.

I mean this is real Tanizaki territory and this is where Tanizaki is really interesting.

And there are a few other books like that. This is, by way of saying, that there is this tendency, just because I have a Japanese name, to pull out one or two other Japanese writers somebody else has heard of and say there is a similarity to my writing. Yet the critic perhaps is basing this comparison to a Japanese writer whose book is typical of others he has written. For example, Tanizaki wrote in a lot of different styles and he wrote for a long, long time. Tanizaki actually went into his eighties and he produced an enormous amount of books as he went through lots of different stages. I can't really see that anybody would particularly compare me to any Japanese writer if it wasn't for the fact that I have this Japanese name. Now if I wrote under a pseudonym and got somebody else to pose for my color jacket photographs, I'm sure nobody would think of saying. "This guy reminds me of that Japanese writer." I often have to battle to speak up for my own individual territory against this kind of stereotyping. I wouldn't say it's wildly unfair, but then I can think of a dozen other writers with whom I could just as easily be compared. I would say I am wildly dissimilar to the Tanizaki of *The Makioka Sisters*, but then someone could equally say that for anybody almost—whether it was George Eliot or Henry James or the Bronte sisters.

KH: How about Chekhov? He would seem to be the one overwhelming influence on American writing over the past ten to fifteen years.

KI: Chekhov is a writer that I always acknowledge as one of my influences. When people ask me about the writers I really like I always say Chekhov and Dostoevski.

To backtrack just slightly on my refuting any affiliation with Japanese literature, there are some things I have learned from the Japanese tradition, too, but perhaps more from the Japanese movies. I think it is the same thing that perhaps I've taken from Chekhov and that's from reading these people and seeing movies by film makers like Ozu and watching the plays of Chekhov and reading Chekhov's short stories. I think it's given me the courage and conviction to have a very slow pace and not worry if there isn't a strong plot. I think there is an overwhelmingly strong tradition in Western literature—at least I should say British literature and American literature since I think the French have a slightly different thing going—in which plot is pretty important and particularly for British fiction. By fiction I also mean movies and the way television stories are told and so on. It is almost assumed that plot has to be the central spine around which the story is fleshed and that is almost the definition these days. When you actually think about Chekhov, it is really hard to actually see his pieces as plots with flesh on it.

This business about pace, you read these books on How To Write a Screenplay or books on how to keep the narrative drive going, yet reading Chekhov indicates that you don't have to worry about that very much. I've really started to get into this idea of slowness with things almost stopping.

AV: This seems evident in *The Remains of the Day* where the plot is loosely based, yet you are able to piece things together. For example, Miss Kenton disappears for much of the novel, but she is always there when you need her to pull things together. The use of Miss Kenton's character seems to allow you to intermingle different elements.

KI: I don't structure my books around thoughts and I find it a great liberation. If you have to worry about making a plot work, you often have to sacrifice other priorities to the mechanical workings of the plot and you start to distort characters and all kinds of psychological insights. I find a great deal of freedom in not having plot, but that does actually mean you have to face lots of new challenges about not boring the reader and how to structure your work. These are some of the things in Chekhov which I find a continual revelation. How does he keep you absorbed when all the people are doing is just sitting around a field and saying whether or not they are going back to

Moscow? He should be crushingly boring. In fact, one or two of those great plays are boring, but some of his short stories are masterpieces.

AV: You have stated that after you wrote *A Pale View of Hills* that, "If you really want to write something, you shouldn't bring things into your book lightly. It's a bit like taking in lodgers. They're going to be with you a long time. I think the most important thing I learned between writing the first and second novels is the element of thematic discipline." (*Contemporary Literature*, 3, 1989, p. 339) Do you now feel you have control of your thematic discipline after having written *The Remains of the Day*?

KI: I'll never say I've got control, but I think I've gotten more and more control with each book. When I read reviews I've always read the opening and closing paragraphs to see if they're saying if this is good or not so good, but then after that the next thing that concerns me is the plot summary. Have they actually summarized the book in the way that I wanted the book to come over? For a long time, at the beginning of my career, I would actually get favorable reviews that praised me for a book that I didn't wish to write. They were emphasizing all the wrong things and praising me for things I didn't intend to do. So I could keep quiet about it and accept unwarranted praise. Of course, this isn't very satisfying and the question of thematic discipline comes in here. There is a real satisfaction to be gotten from being praised for exactly the right things you wanted to be praised for and not for some accidental effect you created. Because that is what you're trying to do. You're not just trying to get people to like your book, you're trying to communicate a vision. This is why thematic discipline is so important to me and particularly in my first book. I used to read all these reviews recommending that people should read my first book for the weirdest reasons, but it had nothing to do with what I was wanting to do. I was pleased because they were favorable reviews, but that was a very frustrating experience for me.

The one point I still feel an element of frustration about, and I mentioned this before, is that people have a tendency to say that *The Remains of the Day* is a book about a certain historical period in England or that it is about the fall of the British empire or something like that. They don't quite read it as a parable or see it take off into a metaphorical role. Now a lot of reviewers have understood my intent and said this is not a book about a butler living in the 1930s. It is interesting that reviews vary from country to country. It tells you something about that country, but it also reminds you that as a writer you're

going to be read by lots of different people in lots of different social contexts coming at the book from lots of different directions. I think it's always a healthy thing to remind oneself that you shouldn't assume every reader's assumption is going to be the same as a British reader's assumption. There are going to be very obvious reasons why some people see it in a completely different way. And usually the further I get from Britain the happier I am with the readings, because the people are less obsessed with the idea of it just being about Britain. In Britain I suppose I'm still slightly locked into this realist reader and I recognize that a part of that is my own responsibility. I hate to use the word fantastic, but the book is still too realistic for the metaphorical intentions to be obvious if the people actually come from the society which the book superficially resembles.

I've been very happy about the way the American reviews, on the whole, have read *The Remains of the Day*. One or two have thought it was specifically about British history, but by and large most people read it the way that I intended to. As I say, I think I had more trouble in Britain where some people thought it was about the Suez Crisis or it was about British appeasement of Nazi Germany.

KH: *The Remains of the Day* and *An Artist of the Floating World* both seem to be about men who have an extraordinary capacity to lie to themselves, while at the same time presenting themselves as very precise and cautious truth tellers. Should we imagine that this is going to be the central obsession in your work? So far, the central notions in your work would seem to demand first-person narration. Are you planning to work in any other forms?
KI: I think this is always a difficult question about how you're going to develop as a writer. I find it rather difficult to plan more than one book at a time and I can't really say now which other themes I'm going to be obsessed about in two or three books from now. I think, certainly, what happened with my first three books is that I was actually trying to refine what I did over and over again and with *The Remains of the Day* I feel that I came to the end of that process. That is why the three books seem to have a kind of similarity. It's not a similarity for which I can apologize; I have no other way of working.

I don't actually think of my writing as being an attempt to recover this territory and finish it and then move over to a different territory altogether and have a go at that. I don't see it like that. I feel like I'm *closing in on some strange, weird territory* that for some reason obsesses me and I'm not sure what the nature of that territory is, but with every book I'm kind of closing in on this strange territory. And that's the way I see my development as a writer. Quite often I will have an idea for a story which is intrinsically quite interesting, but I know immediately that I can't use it because I know it's not going to help me close in on this territory. It has gotten to the point now that I recognize this. I know the things that apply to this territory, which will be relevant or might be relevant from the ones that are quite diverting and therefore irrelevant. If I'm reading a newspaper and I come across an item occasionally something will hit me, something that is perhaps quite banal, but it rings some kind of strange bell. The item doesn't necessarily have to be some kind of weird human interest story, because quite often some ordinary situation will just spring out from the page at me and I'll think that's something I could use.

I don't intend to write about old men looking back over their lives all the time because I think I've come to the end of that, but I think the real challenge that always faces writers is what to keep and what to cast off from their previous concerns and previous books. I think it is important to try to identify those things that still mean something to you, that still feel unfathomed in some way, and that is the way that you close in further and further on this territory. I think most writers do write out of some part of themselves. I wouldn't say unbalanced, but where there is a kind of lack of equilibrium. I'm not suggesting that writers are usually unbalanced people. I know many writers and I would say that most of them are *more than averagely sane* and responsible people, but I think a lot of them do write out of something that is unresolved somewhere deep down and, in fact, it's probably too late ever to resolve it. Writing is kind of a consolation or a therapy. Quite often bad writing comes out of this kind of therapy. The best writing comes out of a situation where I think the artist or writer has to some extent come to terms with the fact that it is too late. The wound has come and it hasn't healed, but it's not going to get any worse; yet the wound is there. It's a kind of consolation that the world isn't quite the way you wanted it, but you can somehow reorder it or try and come to terms with it by actually creating your own world and own version of it. Otherwise, I can't see any other explanation as to why people should actually do this time consuming, antisocial activity of locking themselves away and obsessively writing. I think serious writers have to try, in some way or the other, to keep moving in a direction that moves

them towards this area of irresolution and lack of balance. I think that's where the really interesting deep writing comes from. This is partly why I'm very wary of the creative writing industry. I think it could actually deflect potentially very profound individual voices away from what their muses are trying to tell them.

AV: Please comment on such characters as Etsuko, Ono, Miss Kenton, and Stevens who have misused their talents or have not led lives of fulfillment because of poor decisions due to a lack of insight.

And also, conversely, would their lives be better off (such as Lisa and the footman) if they had insight and no talent?

KI: I wrote about these people not actually to pass judgment on them because I am interested in people who do have a certain amount of talent. Not just talent, but who have a certain passion, a certain real urge, to do a little bit more than the average person. They've got this urge to contribute to something larger.

AV: I can see where this applies to Ono and Etsuko in *An Artist of the Floating World*, but do you think it applies to Stevens?

KI: Yes, definitely. Stevens is somebody who desperately wants to contribute to something larger, but he thinks he is just a butler and the only way he can do this is to work for a great man. He gets a lot of his sense of self-respect from an idea that he is serving a great man. If he were someone who didn't care at all about how his contribution was being used, then he wouldn't end up a broken man at the end. He is driven by this urge to do things perfectly, and not only do things perfectly, but that perfect contribution should be, no matter however small a contribution it is, to improving humanity. That is Stevens's position. He's not content to say, "I'll just get by and earn money so that I can feed myself."

AV: But then again, it didn't seem that Stevens had any great introspection on his behalf as to why things were done or why he was doing things. Nor does Stevens seem to have a great understanding of the world.

KI: That's true, Stevens doesn't have a great understanding. I think this is where my characters go wrong. Their lives are spoiled because they don't have any extraordinary insight into life. They're not necessarily stupid, they're just ordinary. (I write out of this fear that I, myself, will waste my talent. Not only waste my talents, but indeed end up backing some cause that I actually disapprove of or one that could be disastrous.) Yet these ordinary characters often are going to get involved in a kind of political arena even if it's in a very small way. The reason I chose a butler as a starting point was that I wanted a metaphor for this vehicle. Most of us are like butlers because we have these small, little tasks that we learn to do, but most of us don't attempt to run the world. We just learn a job and try to do it to the best of our ability. We get our pride from that and then we offer up a little contribution to somebody up there, or an organization, or a cause, or a country. We would like to tell ourselves that this larger thing that we're contributing towards is something good and not something bad and that's how we draw a lot of our dignity. Often we just don't know enough about what's going on out there and I felt that that's what we're like. We're like butlers.

AV: It seems as if Stevens is devoid of any feelings. For example, his proudest moment as a butler (pp. 91–110) is during Lord Darlington's political conference when his father is dying upstairs. Yet he ignores being with his father since his duty lies elsewhere—primarily trying to get bandages for the sore feet of the snotty Dupont. Even after his father dies Stevens does not go to see his father, whereupon Miss Kenton sarcastically replies: "In that case, Mr. Stevens, will you permit me to close his eyes?" It's almost like Stevens is a piece of cardboard without any identity or feelings.

KI: The role of the butler is to serve inconspicuously while creating the illusion of absence and at the same time being physically on hand to do these things. It seemed to me appropriate to have somebody who wants to be this perfect butler because that seems to be a powerful metaphor for someone who is trying to actually erase the emotional part of him that may be dangerous and that could really hurt him in his professional area. Yet he doesn't succeed because these kinds of human needs, the longings for warmth and love and friendship, are things that just don't go away. This is what Stevens probably realizes at the end of the novel when he starts to get an inkling about this question of bantering. He starts to read more and more into why he can't banter and this is an indication of the fact that he's somehow cut off from other people. He can't even make the first steps in forming relationships with other people.

AV: In the *New York Times Book Review* you state your next book will not be repetitive stylistically and that you might "like to write a messy, jagged, loud kind of book." What kind of book can your readers expect next?
KI: It is very difficult to say. I write very slowly and most of my writing time I'm not actually writing prose. *The Remains of the Day* took me three years and during that time I did nothing else. I don't have any other job and I turn down any offers to do journalism. I was full-time working on that book, but I realized afterwards, looking through my diary, that I actually spent only twelve months writing the words that ended up in that book. It horrifies me to think that I spent two years just working up to it, but I find that I have to have a very close map of where I'm going to go before I actually start to write the words. I have to have it almost all in place in my head first. This is once again quite unusual, because I know plenty of writers who write brilliantly, although they know very little of where they're going when they start the first draft. I have to have all these things worked out and researched. Now things may change, obviously, in the execution when I'm actually writing the words, but I usually have to know fairly precisely what I'm trying to achieve with every paragraph. So it takes me a long time to get to that situation. I fill folders and folders up with notes and ideas which look like excerpts from a longer work. I may experiment with a particular tone or a character during the very early stages when it's very difficult to say even where the book is going to be set. All I know are the themes.

Don Swaim Interviews Kazuo Ishiguro

Don Swaim / 1990

From the Donald L. Swaim Collection (MSS #177), Robert E. and Jean R. Mahn Center for Archives & Special Collections, Ohio University Libraries. Reprinted by permission of Don Swaim and the Mahn Center. Transcribed by Cynthia F. Wong.

In this interview with Don Swaim, Kazuo Ishiguro talks about growing up in England after moving there from Japan when he was six years old. He tells Don about the difficulty of growing up in a bilingual house, and discusses his first and third books, *A Pale View of Hills* and *The Remains of the Day*.

The interview took place on September 15, 1990, on the 16th floor of the CBS Building in Manhattan. An edited version was broadcast on WCBS Radio in three parts beginning on October 22, 1990, and subsequently was syndicated nationally by the CBS Radio Stations News Service. The actual radio broadcast (as opposed to the uncut Wired for Books interview) is posted at http://donswaim.com/bookbeatpodcastvo109.html.

Don Swaim (D): When did you get in town?
Kazuo Ishiguro (K): Thursday. Yes I'm still a little mixed up; my clock is a little mixed up here.

D: Probably suffering a little bit of jet lag.
K: Yeah, I wake up early which is very rare for me. I'm a very late, lazy person.

D: Well, today was an interesting day. There's the Von Steuben Day parade marching up Fifth Avenue . . .
K: Yes, we saw it.

D: . . . and a whole raft of street fairs and street closings. I live in Manhattan. I drove down to the Strand bookstore this morning and ran some errands,

and I made the mistake of taking my car. And I must have been on the local streets for two hours trying to get around parades, street fairs. It's not like that in London, is it?
K: When there's a street fair or parade, you mean? We very rarely have things like that.

D: You would think that on a Saturday there would not be as much chaos as there is in the city.
K: There is chaos. The traffic situation is terrible in London. I mean you've got—the problem you seem to have here is that you've got a lot of traffic, but the problem in London is that the streets aren't really geared for major city traffic. So it's an infrastructure problem.

D: It's on a little island. Of course, in London you have to go around IRA bombing sites a lot.
K: Yes. Well, what you might think of IRA bombings is really people digging up the roads, and it takes them three months to do a job that the Germans or the Japanese would do in two nights. So it looks like a bomb site when you're driving around.

D: It's incredible in this town driving. Driving today there are bulldozers and cranes, and some of them have been on the same stretch of street for weeks, and I always make the mistake of going up that same stretch of street. And inevitably, it narrows to one lane and a fire truck will come, and it's just chaotic, so I'm exhausted. I'm ready to go home now.

Well, you're just starting. How long will you be in the States?
K: On Monday I start a kind of a cross-country tour which will go on for the best part of two weeks. So I'll be taking in the Midwest and the west coast.

D: This is not your first trip to the United States. You were here I believe a year or so ago on the hardcover [tour].
K: Yeah, I've been here since then. I was in Houston for some odd reason about four months ago.

D: That's my home town.
K: Oh, is it?

D: What is the odd reason?
K: It's not such an odd reason. There was some kind of a—well, do you know the Houston International Festival?

D: No, I don't.
K:That's the recent thing. There used to be a Houston festival, do you remember that? Or maybe that was a very small thing. But they've tried to expand this annual festival to make it a kind of international festival. And the theme this year was Great Britain. They take a country as a kind of a theme each year. Last year it was France. Next year is Japan. And so they invited people from Great Britain. I was representing British literature or something. It didn't quite come together, the festival. I think they may have been a little too ambitious in expanding it.

D: I was last there in July in time for the International Summit, and every time I drove I would encounter Margaret Thatcher's motorcade, so even Houston was chaotic. I haven't lived there since I was a child, but my family still lives there.
K: It must have changed enormously from that time.

D: It's huge.
K: Yes, and all the skyscrapers weren't there when you were growing up presumably.

D: I left in the late 1940s, but it was on a postwar building boom then, and so on every block there were new buildings. Yes, so the expansion of Houston did start right after the war.

Let's talk about you, about your work. I've enjoyed both of these books. They are wonderful, wonderful books. Maybe before we talk about the books we talk a little bit about your background and how it came to pass that you became an author. You were born in Japan?
K: Yes, I was born in Japan in 1954 and I came to England—or I should say I went to England in 1960, so I was almost six. And then, I had a more or less straightforward kind of British upbringing, as far as school and friends were concerned.

D: Why did your family move to England?
K: Nothing terribly exciting. My father is, or was (he's retired now) a research scientist, and his project was being sponsored by the British government at that time. He's an oceanographer, and there was a lot going on in the North Sea where the British had found oil. And so it wasn't an emigration; it was a temporary visit for perhaps two years. And in the way that these things happen, it was extended for another year and another year. And so it was a strange sort of way of actually changing country, and I think my parents certainly did not adopt the mentality of immigrants. They were always visitors who preserved their Japanese-ness, and to a certain extent tried to bring their children up for preparation in growing up in Japan ultimately and not in England. And for this reason I think I grew up with a certain distance on the society around me, the British society around me. Although in many ways outside the home, I was getting a very typical southern England middle-class kind of education and upbringing.

D: Did your parents speak Japanese in the home?
K: Yeah.

D: So it's your first language.
K: First language in that it's the first language that I learned but I'm much more competent with English. I have trouble when I encounter Japanese who are strangers because, well, although I can make myself understood, Japanese is a fantastically complicated language in terms of social nuance. It's the complete opposite to American English in that sense. You have to choose a different vocabulary depending on how you perceive the relative status of the person you are speaking to. And to get this wrong is terrible, I mean, it's unforgiveable. I always freeze up if I'm introduced to a Japanese person. I try to keep it to English.

D: You were about six when you went to Great Britain?
K: I was five and a half.

D: So, at that time you did not speak English.
K: I don't recall a time when I couldn't speak English. I think when you're that age you're just picking up things so fast and obviously there must have been a kind of hiatus period when I couldn't handle the language, but I certainly don't remember ever struggling to make myself understood. And, my parents tell me that very rapidly, I was speaking fluently in English.

D: I always wondered how children who grow up in a bilingual household, or household that's primarily a single-language household—but is exposed to a second language—how he separates the two languages. It would seem to me that a child like that would intersperse words from each language in trying to communicate.
K: Well that happened, but obviously in my situation the stronger language was English. The only people I had any contact with who spoke Japanese were members of my immediate family, so it was the Japanese that became invaded and contaminated by English. And so—this is the other problem I have—I find it very difficult to utter a sentence in Japanese without mixing English words into it.

D: Well, children are under enormous peer pressure to be like the other children so when you go out, go to school to play, I would assume that you would want to be like the rest of them.
K: Yes, obviously, no question about it. I would just speak English. And very rapidly, like I said by the time I was six or seven nobody would be able to detect any accent or anything like that in the way I spoke English. I spoke English like anybody else.

D: I believe you said a moment ago that you had a rather typical English upbringing. I wonder about that to a degree—being a Japanese, and the English have a reputation of being insulated in some respects, and aloof and somewhat suspicious of other people. They're not like Americans where everybody comes from someplace else. So, did you ever have the feeling that perhaps you were an outsider?
K: I've often wondered about this, because recently, of course, in England this whole question of multiculturalism, multiracialism in the society has become one of the burning issues. I often ask this sort of question, but when I was growing up in the south of England, that kind of tension between ethnic minority communities and the mainstream white communities—that hadn't really come to a burning point. And also, because I was Japanese, I didn't fit into any obvious category as a foreigner. So, what I learned to do very quickly

was—and unconsciously as a child—well, what I learned was that I was always different and conspicuous. I was often the only foreign-looking kid in the whole place, in any room, in any school, I would be the only kid who was actually not straight, white, English. And I realized this was something I could use for myself or against myself. But, it was almost like being on stage. Very rapidly you had to establish whether the audience was for you or against you, and there was no sort of neutral ground. I think I must have assimilated like that very quickly.

D: How do you accomplish the feat of getting them on your side?
K: I'm not quite sure, but I've always had the English on my side and it's gone right on into my literary career. I had one of the easiest rides any author can have in recent English literary terms. I'm not quite sure, it's something I suppose I learned to do as a child. It helps that when I was a child that I was relatively large, but after puberty a Japanese kid actually starts to get relatively small to his English counterparts. And now, I'm five foot six; I'm smaller than the average Westerner. But often, Japanese kids are five, six, or seven, they're actually much better built and quite chunky and large compared to their Western counterparts. It was often just brute strength; I was just stronger than most of my friends. And then there was this kind of myth that because I was Oriental I had all these mysterious martial arts powers.

D: And the feeling also that Asians are much more intelligent than Westerners.
K: My upbringing in England predated anything like that. Nobody had any preconceptions about me. There was no precedent. Often, they just didn't know. I was quite a sweet-looking kid and the verdict was out. I was the first person they had encountered, and I had to establish whether they liked me or whether they didn't like me. I didn't have this whole kind of a previous record set by other people, other foreigners before me to contend with. I look at a lot of people today, a lot younger friends of mine, perhaps maybe just ten years younger who are not what you might call straight white English, Anglo-Saxon British people, and I think they've had a much more complicated upbringing. Particularly people who've come from Asian backgrounds in waves of immigration from India and Pakistan to Britain—there, they have to actually make a choice between the actual minority community that actually exists within Britain and the mainstream community. I suppose this is something that Americans are perhaps much more mature about, although

I'm sure the same kind of tensions and frictions face people growing up [as] ethnic minorities.

D: America is a country where its people can lose their ethnic identity so there is a feeling that, for example, the Von Steuben day parade is an example of people [who] are proud of being German to salute—the fact of the matter is our population does assimilate and it scatters, so we have fewer and fewer of what we call ghettoes, concentrations of those people.
K: But I think this is one of the really interesting challenges now of our day. I think everywhere the tendency to equate race with citizenship is breaking down in almost every major country now. People having to reexamine what these notions mean: things like citizenship, nationality. The whole question of multiculturalism is breaking out all over the world. Everyone's having to redefine what it actually means to be British or German, and even the Japanese I notice are possibly the last major country to have to face this question. For the first time now, they are beginning to ask these questions about what is the relationship of the mainstream Japanese community to non-Japanese people living in Japan. It's a complete opposite to the United States. When you go to a place like Kyoto, you'll not see anybody who doesn't look Japanese. But there's now the twentieth century catching up with them and there are a lot of workers coming in from southeast Asia, mainland China, and of course there are a lot of westerners now moving into Japan. And they're facing this question now as well. I think this is the way the world is going. This is the age of people losing their labels and having to find new ones.

D: That's going to happen in an age of the Concorde, the fax, and the MacIntosh. It's inevitable.
K: Yeah.

D: It's interesting that your first two books were set in Japan for the most part, and yet, you had not been in Japan since you were a very young child. How did you get this feeling? I mean, when I read *A Pale View of Hills*, I felt as though I were in Nagasaki.
K: People often ask me how much research did I have to do and things like that. You see, what happened was I had to always do what amounted to research all the way through my childhood naturally. Long before I ever dreamt of writing a book, what happened was because I was taken away from

Nagasaki and Japan at an early age, I was separated from the whole way of life and colors and textures and scenery that I had remembered and obviously was very attached to, as well as to people who were very close to me, like my grandparents. I came to England, where I was a very happy kid, but of course I always thought about Japan, this country that I had left, and believed that I would ever return to. So all the way through my growing up and right into my teenage years, there was this alternative world that I thought about and constructed in my head. My parents would tell me about Japan; I would be sent books about Japan. And, I would have these memories of Japan. And so, all through my growing up—just because of my circumstances—I was building an imaginary world in my head, a mixture of imagination and memory and speculation I guess, and by the time I was in my mid twenties, I started to realize that this Japan which was very precious to me—probably didn't correspond to any real country I would find if I got onto an airplane and landed in this airport labeled Tokyo. It was a precious country that existed only in my head and in my heart, I suppose. And I also realized that with every year that went by, it was getting fainter and fainter, and I think I had a great need to put it down on paper and structure it. And so I think that's what drove me to writing novels in the first place. So it really wasn't the case where I said to myself, "Right, I want to write a novel, I'll set it here in this place, I better go and find out about it." I had this world that had built up within me, and eventually it found its expression in a book.

D: At the same token you're not writing a travelogue. You can set your story in Nagasaki and by just a few words, a few lines, get the feeling of being there without describing every event, every pothole, every building—that was not your purpose, in any event.
K: No, no, I'm never particular . . . as a novelist I'm not interested in writing down details about the surface textures of places. To me, I'm creating landscapes of the imagination, landscapes that somehow express various themes and emotions that I'm obsessed by. I don't see my task as being that of a travel writer or a journalist or someone who tries to convey to westerners what it's like in Japan, or conveys to other people what it's like in England. I don't see that as my task. I may use these settings that have enormous emotional reverberation for me, but I'm not really concerned to reproduce accurately these kinds of small surface details, to build up a picture of what the country may look like. I'm much more concerned about its mood, its atmosphere, its emotional intensities.

D: *A Pale View of Hills* is an interesting book not so much for what you have in, but for what you left out. And you have put a certain burden on the reader. I say that in a positive way—to understand what is going on. For example, the woman narrator, we don't know exactly—it's been awhile since I've read it—if I'm not mistaken, we know about her first husband, because she lives with her husband and father-in-law visits. She's narrating this from the perspective of being in England, so we know something happened to her first husband but you don't say what.
K: Particularly the time when I wrote *A Pale View of Hills*—I must say going back ten years—I was very interested in the technique of using gaps and spaces in fiction to create very powerful vacuums. That's something that I always used in my later fiction, but I think it's particularly noticeable in my first book. The reason I'm interested in these gaps, these kinds of black holes of information is because I'm interested in the way people can't face certain things, when people resort to self-deception and tell themselves stories that aren't quite complete about what happened in their past.

So, what's happening in *A Pale View of Hills* is that a woman is looking back over her life, and there are some things that are so painful to her that she can't look at them directly. And so, instead, she starts to tell the reader a story about another woman with another child from way back in the past. And, somehow, by telling this story about another person, she's able to examine certain things that actually happened to her and her own child. I notice this is a way that people often operate. They're often talking about a mutual friend or something like that, and you realize that they're really talking about themselves.

D: You could write a second book and make a whole new book out of the gaps that you left out of the first one.
K: Ah, yes, but it wouldn't be the same book.

D: Well, you could put them together.
K: Fiction interests me because we all use fiction in our daily lives. It's not just authors and writers who use fiction. We all need to actually tell ourselves stories about other people we know or people we read about in the news. And, we use these stories in a way to furnish our own lives and to examine what we do with our own lives. We're often talking about somebody else, and that's actually a good way to try and work out some things about ourselves. This is the way we use fiction; we make up stories about people we know. Of

course, we try to stick more or less to the concrete details about what we see happening to them, but how we interpret what's happening to them—the judgments we pass on them, the critical stances we take towards them—these are often conditioned by what is happening to ourselves, about what we feel is happening in our own lives.

D: And, when we speak autobiographically, it usually tends to be self-serving as autobiographies usually are.
K: And, so yes, autobiographies are often a very treacherous and deceptive and . . .

D: Another thing, another way of meting out, of putting in gaps in your life that you don't want to face or discuss among other people.
K: Yes, gaps are very important parts of the way we look at ourselves.

D: They're like black holes.
K: Yes, and so I don't want to exclude them from my work.

D: I have a unique position in being able to interrogate an author one on one. I had one piece of confusion: toward the end of the book—as I recall—let's see, the little girl (I always forget the names), the little girl has . . . her mother is packing. She's about to go off with Frank, at least she thinks she is going to eventually meet Frank back in the United States. She's packing, the little girl runs away, the narrator goes to find her—and goes out with a lantern, a flashlight—(let me see if I can find this) . . .
K: I think I know the passage that you're referring to . . .

D: Oh here, here it is on page 172: ". . . insects followed my lantern as I made my way along the river . . ." And then, she begins to talk to the little girl. "If you don't like it there we will come straight back." Now this confused me because she seems now to have adopted the role of the little girl's mother.
K: Yes, it's confused a lot of people, but this is because it's the narrative strategy I was explaining before—this is about a woman who really wants to talk about what happened to her in the past, and how she came to bring her own daughter over to England and all these things. We don't quite know what happened, but she doesn't want to examine these very painful things, because many things have ended in tragedy. It's ended in a daughter's suicide and all

these things. And so, the only way she can actually examine that aspect of her life is by looking at somebody else altogether, somebody else's story that in many key respects, resembles her own. And so, that's what the main part of the story of *A Pale View of Hills* is. It's about a woman talking about a friend from the past and her child. But really, her motive in telling that story is to really examine her own story. And so, at the end, she forgets that she is supposed to be not talking about herself, that she's talking about somebody else. The narrative starts to overlap there.

D: Well, I had to go back over that a few times, and I thought that I would ask you that. I'm still not quite satisfied with that explanation a little bit, because there's almost another voice in there as a narrator it seems.
K: The key to this is—it may be difficult for listeners to follow this discussion if they haven't read the book. The key to this is the relationship of the narrator, Etsuko, to this woman she is talking about, Sachiko. Are they in fact the same people? My answer is, not literally. There probably was another person called Sachiko way back in the past, but when she is telling Sachiko's story, I mean she's not telling the story because she is fascinated by Sachiko intrinsically. It's because she sees in what happened to Sachiko something that happened to herself. For the purposes of this story that she's telling, Sachiko represents her.

D: And in fact, it entered my mind that perhaps the daughter who committed suicide may well have been the little girl, that very disturbed little girl in Nagasaki.
K: But once again, not literally, but yes. That's why she's telling the story, because here is an instance of a mother and a child that closely parallels what happened in her own life.

D: You understand, don't you, that while this is ten years old to you, it's a brand new book for many other people who are reading it for the first time?
K: It's more or less a brand new book here in the United States. Of course it came out in England and other countries; it did actually produce this kind of puzzled effect quite often. It was often said to be a very mysterious book. In fact, in the English paperback version I think it's got blasted on the back cover words like "enigma" and stuff like this. That's the reputation it had on any person slightly baffled by the ending.

D: When was the book first published in the United States?
K: In the United States as a hardback I think it came out the same time it came out in England, back in 1982.

D: And was this your first book?
K: Yes, that was my first book.

D: You have the second novel—which I haven't read—also set in Japan. And *The Remains of the Day* is your third book?
K: That's right.

D: Extraordinary book. I know you've been asked many times how you researched it, how you got into the mind of the butler, but I would imagine there are a few people who can challenge your facts. I wonder if we have butlers like that today.
K: Well, my attitude to that is I'm not concerned. If a real butler pops up today and says, "Look, you've got this and this and this wrong. That's not the way we did things," it would be beside the point. No, my purpose is not to try and recreate accurately what life was like for a real butler in England in [the] 1930s. That to me is of very limited interest. All right, some sociologist [or] some social historians may be interested, but of course I've chosen the figure of a butler for metaphorical reasons. I'm trying to say various things that concern me as a person living in the 1990s, or the 1980s, when I wrote that book. I'm talking through the myth created around the figure of the English butler. He's a metaphor for me in various respects.

D: Can you be a little more specific about that?
K: I have no interest in butlers per se: I don't know any butler, I don't have any ambition to be a butler, I certainly never had any butlers working in any houses I have ever lived in. I came to the butler via all these themes that I wanted to write about. And I suppose this roughly divides into two things that I wanted to talk about in the book. First was a frustrating feeling I had as somebody who had grown up in an idealistic time in the late '60s and early '70s, when the younger generation—people of my age—we grew up thinking that we were going to change the world, that we had a duty to change the world. And we had a lot of idealistic notions. I was often involved in many politically active groups and also in voluntary social work fields. But, as we got older, things just started

to get more and more complicated. And today, I sense that this is very much a burden on many of us—this is the emotion I was trying to convey. Here I am—somebody who was supposed to be educated, somebody with a certain sense of responsibility, living in a democratic country—I have this notion that it's up to people like me, ultimately, to decide on the big questions, how the country is run, the decisions the government makes—because this is what it means to be a citizen in a democratic country.

And yet, on the other hand, I became more and more conscious how ignorant I was about many of the most burning, key, important issues of the day. I cannot really talk in a very intelligent way about world economics, science, and technology, international diplomacy, ecology. Of course I have a smattering of knowledge from what I pick up in newspapers and stuff like that. But, here I am, somebody with two university degrees, a lot of time to read and think, and yet I know that I am very incompetent. I only have a very nominal knowledge and expertise in the most crucial areas. And yet I have this responsibility as a member of a democracy. This seems to me one of the paradoxes we live in, in democratic societies. And most of us I felt, we don't really get into position where we run things. What we do is we just kind of do our little jobs, we just get on with our small lives and hope for the best. The little things that we accomplish will somehow filter up there into the big important world and contribute to something we would approve of. Most of us, we don't head governments or lead coup d'etats. What we do is we do a job, we work for an employer or organization or maybe some cause—political cause—and we just do a little thing. We hope that somebody up there, upstairs uses our little contribution in a good way. In other words, we're rather like butlers. And so I ended up with this figure of the butler. He knows how to serve tea, he takes great pride in how he can run a household. But he says, "Look I'm just a butler. I can't make these big decisions about how we run the world. But I'll get some dignity from saying that I'm serving a master, a great man who does know all about these big things." And, he abandons responsibility over his political life, and his tragedy is that the person he's working for is a Nazi sympathizer. This is the feeling I was trying to convey.

The other attraction of a butler for me is that, certainly in England . . . I found [in] most places in the world that the figure of the butler stands for a certain kind of ridiculous, pompous, stiff, emotionally constipated caricature of a human being. And when people try to emulate butlers, that's what they try to do, they try to behave in a way that seems to cancel out anything that's

spontaneously human. And I wanted very much in this book to talk about emotional suppression, the tendency to mistake, the tendency to equate expressing emotion with weakness. And I think this is a trait very strong in English society and Japanese society. And possibly, the male sex is more prone to do this than the female sex. But I wanted to talk about that area in all people, that arena that we're all most scared of, which is the emotional arena, the space where we really put our emotions at risk—our feelings—that's the most scary arena of all. And in *The Remains of the Day*, I try to paint the portrait of a man by pretending that he's being utterly professional, by pretending that he's seeking out some sort of special dignity, is really just hiding, is really just cowardice. He just retreats and hides from that arena of scary human emotions.

D: Does Stevens actually see the love emanating from the housekeeper who is probably the most charming character in the book? Does he see it and ignore it, or is he oblivious to it?
K: I think somewhere deep down, he sees it and that's why he's so scared. He's a man very, very scared of love, and that's why he puts up this incredible alibi really, saying that he is this dedicated professional butler. And that it's the duty of the butler not to have any emotions and to him, that's a kind of a professional perfection. But what I'm suggesting, what Stevens comes to realize at the end of the book is that it's a very hollow achievement, and in fact, it's not an achievement at all; it's just cowardice, it's just a way of running away from the really challenging, really scary part of being a human being.

D: In a way, the villagers that he encounters toward the end of the book—you have it as they say—are all more together than Stevens as they gather in that living room and they talk politics. And they seem to be much more of a part of society than Stevens would allow himself to be.
K: Yes, and I think he starts to understand from his contact with people like these villagers that there is another definition of dignity. And the one that is offered to him by these particular villagers discussing politics is that dignity that comes from being a democratic citizen, the ability to control, to some extent, your own fate. But that only comes if you actually accept the responsibility and participate. So he starts to actually have this other notion of dignity challenging his own notion of dignity. Up till then, he thinks dignity is just behaving like a butler in this kind of very stiff, unruffled way which he

begins to see toward the end of the book is a very empty and shallow definition of the word.

D: The book is also very, very funny. Sometimes, some critics may overlook that fact, but I can see George Bernard Shaw picking up the silver and marveling over the shine and the luster. I mean, that was one of the very funny parts of the book. Now, there's a lot of humor in this book and that's poignant, too. But it's very funny. And also, the language—I love your use of language. When I first started reading it, I said to myself, "Boy, this is really stiff. I'm not going to like this book. This language is so stilted." And then, I realized that you had developed the voice of this character, that it's the same all the way through the book. It was a very deliberate effort to get into the mind of the man and to use his voice, which is a hard thing to do.
K: I guess it is. It's a technique you use as a writer. I've always used first-person narrative, and for me, the great advantage of using a narrator who is also a central character is that you tell readers what that character is like, not just through what happens to him and what he says and does to other characters, but just through the tone of his voice, those words that are there on the page. And so I think a very subtle relationship is created with the reader and the central character, if the central character is the one actually telling the story. So, for that book I tried to write the whole book in a kind of "butler-speak." So that the actual language—the way that he struggled in the way he used the language—just to keep a hold of his emotions, just to keep in control and not lose control, would actually support the theme of the book. And so, the language itself is of someone who is afraid of the human in him. He always uses these words that keep his opinions and emotions at a distance.

D: Now, when you began to write *The Remains of the Day*, did you—you spoke philosophically in using this as a metaphor. Here's someone [who is] a small part of life and not part of the big picture doing what he has to do. But wasn't it really an effort to tell a story? You're a storyteller. I mean, does someone like yourself sit down before a typewriter or a word processor—or whatever you use—and say, "I'm going to write this metaphor for life." Or, can you just tell a story?
K: I do that. What I do is I always start the theme, and that's the controlling factor. It probably happens to a lot of authors. People come up to you and say, "Look, this funny thing happened to me." And they tell you this little

anecdote that happened to them. And they say, "I thought I'd tell it to you because you're an author and you might be able to use it." And this quite often happens to me, and often what they tell me is a quite interesting little anecdote with an interesting twist. But it's usually of no concern to me, no interest to me whatsoever, unless I think I can use that piece of narrative to express one of the themes I am obsessed by. In other words, I'm not interested in plot for its own sake. For me, plot is just one of the many tools an author has to express a certain thing. And so, for me, I always start with this question, "What is this book going to be about? What are the themes I'm going to explore?" I'm not talking about a clear message. There's nothing more boring than books with messages. But theme is something else. You're asking questions about certain areas. You're saying, "What about this? What about that?" A debate of some sort with myself—and, I find it very important to maintain some kind of discipline in my writing, so that all these things like plot, character—all these other things you put into a book—all serve clearly what you want these things to serve. That is, the expression of the theme, the exploration of the theme.

D: When you were writing *The Remains of the Day*, did you know where you were going? The reason I ask that question is—one very fine novelist, Bobbie Ann Mason, was telling me that when she starts a story, she sometimes has a line, just a line or just an image. For example, she wrote a wonderful short story that became a very complex story about a family that had started simply because of an image of bees flying into an attic. And it just started from there. She didn't have an idea of where it was going to go. It seems to me a hard way to write, but I think some people do it. But, in your case, how do you approach a book like that?
K: I know many writers who write that and I'm a great admirer of Bobbie Ann Mason's work. And many of my friends in England and elsewhere in the world who are writers I know work probably closer to Bobbie Ann Mason's work than my way of working. At one extreme, you have these writers who put in a blank piece of paper into a typewriter or whatever it is they use. They have no idea what is going to tumble out, and they kind of improvise, and all kinds of strange dark things sometimes surface on the page. And then they look at that, edit it, shape it; they start to use their conscious artistic mind and shape it. I can't work like that. It's just a temperamental thing. I always have to have a clear map of where I'm going before I start to write the

actual words that end up in a book. So I spend a lot of time planning and researching. And, by researching I don't necessarily mean the kind of research a journalist might do, a nonfiction writer would do. But I actually have to research that fictional landscape in my mind. I have to know—I find I have to know fairly thoroughly what the characters are going to be like, what their relationships are like, what the moods and atmospheres of the fictional world I'm going to be writing about are like. I have to get all that right. I spend often two years planning a book, filling up folder after folder with notes and diagrams before I start to write the actual prose.

D: I'm sorry, say that again, two years?
K: Yeah, *The Remains of the Day* took me three years to write. The book before that also took three years to write, and each case I think I spent two years planning and just one year writing the prose.

D: So you have two years of planning and one year of actual writing.
K: Yeah, the actual writing is not for me the problem. I've got to a point where I'm fairly technically competent to write the words without too much of an effort. It takes time, because there are a lot of words [to write], but for me, the real challenge, the real difficult bit is to get the thing in shape in my head, to have the ideas and have that fictional world built into my head—that's the real challenge. When I know that world very well, then I can then do the words, that's something that doesn't bother me too much.

D: I was interviewing the novelist Edward Abbey who died last year. He was telling me that someone came up to him once and said, "How long does it take for you to write a novel?" And Abbey said, "A lifetime." I thought that was a wonderful response because in a way, it's a sum total of everything you've learned and understood about people and yourself into something that you write.
K: Yes, that's absolutely right. I think when I say it took me three years to write the book, of course, if I was confined to just the experiences for those three years, I'd write something retarded.

D: I doubt that will ever happen! Well, what are you working on now?
K: The problem is that the book industry has become so obsessed. If you have anything like a success with a book, it's very difficult to start work on your next

one, because you spend a lot of your time traveling around the world, supporting one publication after another. Because what happens is that you write a book and it comes out in different countries at various different times and different editions and different languages, and often, you go to those places. And, I've spent the best part of the last year and a half just traveling.

D: Well, that goes with the territory. That's what William Kennedy—when he won the Pulitzer Prize for his novel, *Ironweed*—he says, "That's giving the book its due."
K: Well, I find the whole process of traveling fascinating, and I enjoy it, you know, but at some point I have to go back and lead a kind of much more dull life and resume my writing.

D: I would assume that you're writing when you're not writing.
K: I hope so. That's what I tell myself when I'm . . .

D: Well, the two years of preparation before you actually started to write is an indication that you probably are always working. Today, for example, on my way here I was waiting at a stoplight and I overheard—there were two young girls talking—one girl was saying to the other, and she said, "He's been so upset, he has locked himself in his room and he won't come out! And we banged on the door and he refuses to come out and we don't know what to do." And then the light changed, and I began to think about that, and that was just a thread of conversation, somebody locking himself in a room, depressed obviously, won't come out, and I began to think, "I'll probably be thinking about that for a long time. Maybe I'll write something down about that." I mean, if you had heard that, maybe you might have seen a better way to . . . or an image that was in your mind from some distant time, you will elaborate on it mentally as you flew across the Atlantic. I mean, doesn't that happen to you?
K: Oh, of course, all the time, and particularly, if you travel to foreign countries, so many things that the natives of that country may take for granted strike you as odd or interesting, or perhaps sometimes gives you a really profound insight into the way the world works. And so, that kind of thing is happening all the time, and I would hope it's all digesting somewhere, and it may be of use to me, either as a human being or as a writer. But, there comes a point if you are a writer—and this is the difference between just people who travel all the time or people who are writers—so there comes a point when

you try to sit down and actually try to shape things out of your experience. You try to structure things, and that's why some people are artists and other people aren't. The former category has this strange urge every now and again to retreat into some dull little room and try and put all of this together, all of these different images, all these different insights, all these different ideas, and try and bang something into shape.

D: Such willpower it must take for the writer to go into the privacy of his room and do something without anyone standing over his shoulder. I have to come to work here everyday. Everyday I have certain duties in the newsroom: I have to write for this newscast, and I have to be here at certain times. And then I pick up a paycheck at the end of the week. But for a writer not to be told to do anything, you just do it.
K: I think for many writers, it's not so much willpower, it's obsession. I mean, they don't miss for one moment someone standing over their shoulder. There's something deep inside them that makes them carry on with this weird, strange, anti-social activity, sitting in a room on their own, banging out a book. And I've often asked myself why do writers—perfectly well-balanced social beings—why do they do this? There are some people who do this without making any money. They ruin their marriages, they ruin their jobs, because they go home at night and insist on writing. It's not just the professional writers who do this. It's a very, very strong urge.

D: In fact, most people in this country don't make any money.
K: Some people do. I've run into a few who make a log of money. But I think the money thing is often a red herring. Obviously, in every society, in every age, there have been people who have felt this need to somehow get down and try to make sense of things through the written word. And I think it's got nothing to do with—well, sometimes, it's to do with money, something to do with people imposing artificial deadlines. But what keeps this whole writing thing going is this is a very natural, deeply rooted mechanism that human beings have, that when the world appears just slightly out of balance, if there's something wrong somewhere, the only consolation you can give yourself is perhaps to try and create your own fictional alternative, or to present your own vision of things.

I've looked at a lot of other writers, and I've tried to ask myself, "What do they have in common? What do all these people who do these weird, strange

things, what do they have in common?" I've come to this conclusion that most writers—and I suppose I have to include myself in this—somewhere deep down, they are slightly unbalanced. Now, I don't mean they're crazy people—some writers are the most responsible people I've come across anywhere—but, somewhere very deep and fundamental in their experience with life, maybe somewhere in their childhood, something didn't quite match up, and they know there is nothing they can do about it now. And I think they go over this wound over and over again in their writing. Some do it through painting, some do it through music. But as I say, it's the only kind of consolation people have when they realize that something has gone fundamentally wrong, some equilibrium has been lost somewhere way back, and they can never retrieve it. But there's a consolation: you start to build your own world. You try to say, "Maybe the world is like this." It's your attempt to just go over something that can never really be gone over.

D: Well, it's an artistic impulse and nobody has been able to understand it, explain it. The attempt to be creative has never been understood.
K: Sometimes it's just straight egotism, of course. People want attention.

D: Well, I think most people want some attention. I think we all have egos. It's necessary to go through life. You have to have some degree of success. Even a little success like making the green light, you know, just little things can sometimes make your day.

Well, we could go on forever. I can ask you a lot of other questions but our time is up.

These are beautiful books. These are the first paperbacks, aren't they, of each book? Just came out, brand new?
K: That's correct.

D: Most people who have missed your work in the past I think will benefit from these Vintage International paperbacks. What a wonderful way to present your work. Is your second book, is that in print here?
K: That's also in Vintage. That was published last year as a Vintage paperback.

D: I'm going to have dig that one up. You haven't started on the new one yet?
K: No, as I said, I've been traveling the world too much to write.

D: I've got three years to . . . I better make sure I pronounce your name right, "Kazuo"?
K: Yes, that's not bad.

D: ". . . Ishiguro."
K: Not bad for an American speaking Japanese!

D: Thank you very much.
K: Thank you very much.

Kazuo Ishiguro with Maya Jaggi

Maya Jaggi / 1995

From *Writing Across Worlds: Contemporary Writers Talk*, ed. Susheila Nasta, pp. 159–170. Reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis Group.

Kazuo Ishiguro was born in Nagasaki, Japan in 1954 and came to Britain in 1960. He was awarded the Booker Prize in 1989 for his third novel *The Remains of the Day*, following *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) and the Whitbread Prize-winning *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986). *The Remains of the Day*—produced on film by Merchant-Ivory—tells the tale of an English butler, Stevens, who, after squandering opportunities for life and love through an excess of characteristic reserve, looks back on his service at Darlington Hall in the 1930s. In contrast, Ishiguro's novel *The Unconsoled* (1995) is in part a study of creative drive. Its narrator, Ryder, a fêted English Classical Pianist, arrives in central Europe to give a concert but stumbles across acquaintances from his Worcestershire youth, or characters who mirror stages of his own life from boyhood to dotage.

In this interview, conducted in London, Maya Jaggi talked to Ishiguro about the creative processes which informed the composition of *The Unconsoled*, a work which signals a break with realism in Ishiguro's oeuvre and draws on slippages in time and place as well as the voices of memory. Since this interview took place, Ishiguro has written *When We Were Orphans* (2000) and is currently working on *Never Let Me Go*.

Maya Jaggi: The landscape of *The Unconsoled* is surreal or imaginary. Much of the novel takes place inside Ryder's mind, with his acquaintances from England moving in and out. What made you set the book in central Europe?
Kazuo Ishiguro: It doesn't have to be central Europe, but it has to be somewhere. I've been dogged by the problem of setting, partly because of my Japanese ancestry. People have scrutinized the settings of my books, assuming

they're key to the work. In some senses that's true, but it emerged as a major problem. When I set my books in Japan, their relevance seemed to be diminished in the eyes of some readers. People seemed to say, "That's a very interesting thing we've learned about Japanese society," rather than, "Oh, isn't that indeed how people think and behave—how we behave." There seemed to be a block about applying my books universally because the setting was so overwhelmingly alien. I thought that by dropping Japan, people would focus on the more abstract themes, the emotional story. And by and large, *The Remains of the Day* was read more for the inner story, though there were still people saying this is an interesting piece of social history, a recreation of life for servants between the wars. Then you get into a debate as to how accurately the texture of life was reproduced—the set-design question. I could see it was fair enough, I was working in this realist mode, trying to make the setting as convincing as possible. But there was a problem that people thought it was about the 1930s, or was some parable of the fall of the British empire. There was a tendency to locate it physically, as an extension of journalism or history, except with dialogue and characters. I thought I should try to set a novel in a world that is so odd, so obviously constructed according to another set of priorities, that it must be obvious we're not in the game of trying to faithfully recapture what some real place is like. One of the last things I decided was where *The Unconsoled* was. I didn't name any place, but I always thought it was the western part of central Europe, like Austria or Switzerland. I just needed to have an English guy who was not in England. He had to be away, travelling, for the techniques to work. But I'm hoping people won't get too hung up on where it's set, or read it as some strange allegory on the fall of the Berlin Wall.

MJ: You once said you first write scenes and dialogue, and then look for a "beautiful landscape," a location, to set them in. Is that how you wrote *The Unconsoled*?
KI: No, I did write *The Unconsoled* differently. I used to map out my novels very carefully before I started to write. This is a key question for anyone writing: how much have you worked out before you start writing the prose? That decision goes to the heart of a writer's approach. At one extreme you have writers who like to put in a blank sheet of paper and see what falls out, then they shape it. Whereas I find that process rather terrifying—perhaps it's something to do with having a cautious nature. I was always at the other end

of the spectrum. I'd spend two years working things out—the themes in particular, and the characters—before I started writing. But with *The Remains of the Day*, I was both pleased and disappointed by the extent to which the targets and aims I'd written down at the planning stage were fulfilled. The book I ended up with was almost exactly the book I'd planned. That's fine, but it's something to do with the point in my life, and in my writing, that I didn't want to do that again. With *The Unconsoled*, there was much more a sense of exploration, and improvisation. I deliberately wanted to try shifting the starting point. I started to become aware after *The Remains of the Day* that by adjusting the stage at which I started, it would take me into areas I perhaps wouldn't get into with a more controlled approach. There was also a strange dovetailing. *The Remains of the Day* is about someone obsessed with controlling every aspect of his life, to the point where the emotional life gets stifled. Somehow he misses the most important things. Because it was a first-person narrative, there comes a point when you ask, am I writing about a person like this, in a voice like this, because I am afraid of losing control in the writing process? Some of the things I'd gone through in writing the book, looking at the benefits and costs of being so controlled in all aspects of your life, as the butler is, led me to think I should write about more messy areas of myself and start at an earlier point, when things aren't completely mapped out.

MJ: You've remarked that the same words recurred in reviews of your first three novels—"understated," "restrained." Was that partly what pushed you to write a different king of novel—in particular, the broad comedy towards the end of *The Unconsoled*?
KI: These adjectives that kept turning up, like "Spare," "subtle," "controlled," surprised me because I wasn't trying to create an understated, calm voice in the first two novels. Because they're first-person narratives, people weren't sure if this was me or the narrator's characterization. I concluded it was to some extent me, although I didn't let on; I said, "Yes of course, that character is very formal, isn't he?" *The Remains of the Day* was the first book I wrote when I was conscious these things were being said about my style. It was like an exaggerated version of this buttoned-up stuff. It was an easy step to take something attributed to me and make a stylized version, almost a caricature of it. At the same time, there was an uncomfortable realization. Some of the themes I was dealing with with Stevens did lead me to ask questions about myself: to what extent do you open yourself when you write, take risks, allow

in certain things you might not be able to admit into your consciousness—and all the attendant technical problems that come with that? You can't have the same technical control, but you have an instinct that this is where the interesting stuff lies, and that you shouldn't keep going over old ground but should be digging around where it's uncomfortable. This perception of me as a writer did lead me to take a more risky approach—certainly more emotionally risky. The humour is perhaps a defence mechanism. We often use humour in that way when things are getting dodgy, dangerous. A safety net. I wouldn't want a novel like this to be too solemn. Often, if we're going into uncharted territory, there's a temptation to crack a few jokes or adopt a comic tone. I wrote the whole thing as a kind of comedy; not a ha ha ha falling about thing, but I saw this whole world as working in a darkly comic way.

MJ: Did you discover things, as you perhaps hoped you would, that you felt you were missing by being more controlled?
KI: I think so. At the more superficial levels, I started to evolve a different method of writing. I had the freedom to experiment a bit more technically. This book moves away from straight realism. Up to this book, I'd worked in a more or less traditional way, using suspension of disbelief on the reader in a particular setting, then moving the characters around. I wanted to move away from a recognizably real setting, but you can't then proceed as you did before. If you create an alternative world where alternative rules exist—physical, temporal, behavioural—there has to be a consistency, a new set of rules. You have to figure them out for yourself, because there aren't many models.

MJ: Did you follow any literary models?
KI: Kafka is an obvious model once you move away from straight social or psychological realism. Some other countries may have strong non-realistic traditions, but I'm not familiar with them. In the Western tradition you have one-offs, like Kafka and Nabokov.

MJ: What about Chekhov for the comedy?
KI: I love Chekhov; his short stories were a big influence on *The Remains of the Day*. But it was partly that I was trying to leave behind that relatively tranquil atmosphere on the surface with frustrations bubbling underneath. The two writers I ripped off in this case—this is suicide, telling you who influenced

me—were Kafka and Dostoevsky. There's a dream-like quality to Kafka, and Dostoevsky builds up to farce but with serious grand themes. His big four novels are like a Brian Rix low-comedy stage farce, when lots of strands grow to hysterical pitch, then all the characters end up off the stage, screaming away, with doors opening here and there. That tone of hysteria and farce is interesting, and he uses it to very serious ends. I also read Samuel Beckett—mainly the prose.

MJ: How exactly does your technique in *The Unconsoled* differ from your previous novels?
KI: In the past I used a method where somebody looked back over his or her life in old age. You built up a picture through flashback of the key points in their life as they tried to assess it. *The Unconsoled* isn't that different, except you have somebody in the midst of their life, with all the attendant confusion. The whole thing is supposed to take place in some strange world, where Ryder appropriates the people he encounters to work out parts of his life and his past. I was using dream as a model. So this is a biography of a person, but instead of using memory and flashback, you have him wandering about in this dream world where he bumps into earlier, or later, versions of himself. They're not literally so. They are to some extent other people, but he gives a reading of their life in such a way that they're memories of how his own childhood was, or projections of how he fears he might end up. I don't want to say literally that Stephan is Ryder when he was young, and Boris was Ryder as a kid, but I wanted to create a world where you could get all these different points in his life. Essentially, you're only dealing with one person. For me, this method gives me a lot of freedom. It's how we use dream. We might dream about the shopkeeper we encountered earlier in the day, but underneath, it's somebody from the past we're trying to work out. I think we do this when we're awake as well. Our view of other people is often shaped by our need to work certain things out about ourselves. We tend to appropriate other people—more than we perhaps care to admit. We perhaps don't see them for what *they* are; they become useful tools.

MJ: You've said the book wasn't planned out, but what themes did you start with in your mind?
KI: A central thread is that the book's about a person for whom something has gone wrong way back in his life, and a lot of his energy, the motivation behind his acquiring his expertise and his brilliance as a musician, is his

thinking he can fix this thing one day. He has a completely private project of acquiring his prowess to fulfil this inner mission. But by virtue of doing this, people build him up into this messiah figure and he ends up with a huge baggage of responsibility. People who are driven to pursue some hopeless personal agenda accrue expectations from the community at large. So there's a strange discrepancy between his crucial inner agenda and what other people want him to do. A lot of the chaos results from the strain between the two. The novel's essentially about the moment when Ryder realizes he can't fix the things he wanted to fix, that it's too late and, at best, all this brilliance is some compensation, a consolation for something that can never be put right.

MJ: Ryder's feeling that something has gone wrong way back in his life that he has to put right, is that connected for you with parents and the fractures within families?
KI: Yes. When we're talking about things that go wrong fundamentally, at the heart of somebody's life, we are often talking about family and things early on—something crucial to do with emotional bereavement or emotional deprivation. This isn't necessarily an overtly psychoanalytic view; I'm not a great subscriber to Freudian theory. It's just my observation of myself and people around me. Oddly enough, as I've got older I've started to feel this more. When you're younger you have a certain strength that comes from the very provisionality of life, you think things are going to shape up eventually. But things seem to catch up on people somewhere after the age of thirty-five, from way back in their past. You start to get a sense of the limit of what you can do, or of what's going to happen to you in life. I don't necessarily mean any huge trauma, though in some people that is the case. It might have been a chronic thing, or something as simple as childhood coming to an end, discovering that the world is more complicated than the world of childhood. It's my feeling that a lot of creative people and those strongly motivated in politics derive a lot of that motivation and drive from something that's out of line way back.

MJ: Have you identified something in yourself as part of that pattern?
KI: Possibly. This is a more complex question. The view presented in this book derives from an observation of myself and others like me. After you've spent years sitting alone in some study writing novels, you start to wonder why you do it. You can think of practical justifications, like earning money.

But I remember when I had no idea I'd earn anything. There are people out there who give up all their free time, who're prepared to wreck their relationships and marriages because they want to write their novel, or make their film, or campaign for this and that. I became curious about why other people did it. . . . Sometimes it's associated with some horrific thing, like being abused as a child, but often it's not as blatant. It still begs the question of why some people do it and others not.

MJ: For you, was the lost equilibrium to do with displacement?
KI: Yes, in my case. I think it is something to do with moving from Japan to England. For me, the creative process has never been about anger or violence, as it is with some people; it's more to do with regret or melancholy. I don't feel I've regretted not having grown up in Japan. That would be absurd. This is the only life I've known. I had a happy childhood, and I've been very happy here. But it's to do with the strong emotional relationships I had in Japan that were suddenly severed at a formative emotional age, particularly with my grandfather. I lived with my grandparents for the first five years of my life; it was a three-generational family, and my father was away for three of my first five years. So my grandfather was the head of the household, the person I looked up to. It's only in the past few years that I've begun to appreciate the importance of what happened then. I've always been aware that there was this other life I might have had—not in terms of being happier in that society. But here was a very important bond. It didn't get severed, because I always thought I was going back, but it faded away. Then he died when I was still in England.

MJ: Why did you choose that title?
KI: It's this thing you can't fix—Brodsky talks about a wound. It's something you can't fix or heal; all you can do is caress it. If creative people are driven to writing novels, politicians to leading parties or revolutions, by some inner thing, success is never going to fix it; the most it can be is a consolation for the thing they lost early on. Brodsky thinks late in life that even the love of a woman can only be a consolation, but nevertheless, he thinks it's worth having. These people don't get even that, that's why they're unconsoled.

MJ: There's a recurrent theme in your work of self-delusion, people evaluating their life and achievements, and deluding themselves in the process. But

for Ryder, there doesn't seem to be the moment of realization that he's evaluated his life wrongly.
KI: In a way, the first three books were each an attempt to rewrite or hone down the material used in the previous one. It was almost three attempts to cover the same territory. With *The Remains of the Day*, I came to the end of that process. This was part of the reason for not using that method; the theme comes with that technique. In those days, I was interested in how people lie to themselves just to make things palatable, to make a sense of yourself bearable. We all dignify our failures a little bit, and make the best of our successes. I was interested in how someone settles on a picture of himself and his life. Ryder's not one of these characters. Although I was interested in self-deception, that method creates a sense of life being ordered, because you're witnessing it at a point of reassessment. You see a shape emerging: that was the point at which a mistake was made, or a key opportunity was let slip. You can misapply your energies or your loyalties. But in those novels, life seems quite orderly; it seems that if you stood back you could reduce your life to these key moments, when you decided to be loyal to this person, or didn't make the break at this point, or didn't declare your true emotions to this person.

But as I got older (I'm forty now) I wanted something that would reflect the uncertainty and chaos I started to feel. Life didn't feel to me like a process whereby episodes came at you and you didn't live up to the moment or you did. It wasn't as clear as that; things seem messier. I wanted to write a book not from the viewpoint of someone looking back and ordering his experience, but of someone in the midst of chaos, being pulled in different directions at once, and not realizing why. Self-deception is dealt with differently in this book. It's absurdly exaggerated. Ryder's always deluding himself. His memory and perception are convenient for him; he censors things, and manages to pinpoint things he emotionally needs and blot out others. He'll forget things from a few minutes before and rewrite things that just happened.

MJ: Why did you choose a musician as your central character?
KI: It was convenient. I didn't want him to be a writer . . .

MJ: And you'd done the artist . . .
KI: Yes. But here, although he's a musician, music doesn't function in a realistic way. It doesn't play the role in this world that it plays in the real world. Music seems to have taken the role of politics: the question of which kinds of

musicians should be celebrated and which demoted is rather like who should be prime minister or president. So *yes*, he's a musician, and he's not a musician. I was working with this metaphor of music standing in for other things which in a realistic book I would have to map out. I wanted a figure people looked towards for cultural and spiritual leadership, and expected much of, and his need to fulfil this role. At least music was something I was vaguely familiar with . . .

MJ: That's part of the metaphor, the idea that people don't really understand this music, and Ryder's their interpreter. It's partly to do with control and losing control of life.
KI: Yes, musical forms have got so complex and are deemed absolutely crucial to the quality of life, but people don't understand them any more, they have to look to experts to guide them. This is something I feel, that we're supposed to be democratic citizens, ultimately responsible for the big decisions. I've had the privilege of a good education, but I'm completely ignorant if you ask me questions about economics or industrial or military policy. I could probably give very basic answers. In democracies ultimately, we are responsible if our governments do weird things. The buck has to stop with us. But when you have to worry about your job and looking after your child and going to Tesco, it's difficult to make yourself sufficiently expert on monetary theory or the effect of taxation on the inflation rate. Most of the big questions seem to be so complex it's beyond most of us. We find ourselves expecting these expert leader figures to save us.

MJ: When *The Remains of the Day* came out, you said: "I write out of fear I might try to do things I think are important and later realize they're not as great and useful as I thought. We all live in small worlds." Is that Ryder's fear, as well as yours?
KI: In the past, I was careful not to write things that only apply to me. I know there's nothing frightfully interesting about the travails of a writer. The only interesting bits are those that are the same for anyone who strives to make something of their lives. With Ryder, I might be going dangerously close to somebody who people don't readily identify with—a celebrity, an artist. The universality might be limited by his special position. That's something that happens when you don't plan, you write instinctively. Perhaps this was a spilling over of an autobiographical concern of mine, as I've started to gain

notoriety, and to feel pressures on me. But I've always asked what in my life is relevant to everyone else.

MJ: You went back to visit Japan in 1989 for the first time since you left Nagasaki aged six. Do you think you'll ever set something in Japan again?
KI: I might do. It was good, but odd. I was surprisingly big news. As this Japanese who's gone abroad, lost his Japaneseness and won a prize, I was both comforting and the embodiment of their worst fears. It was an official visit organized by the Japan Foundation—the equivalent of the British Council. . . . It was a privileged visit and there was an unreality about it. I was carried around in a bubble. . . . I was cushioned or distracted from the emotions of going back; I went back and I didn't go back. I always knew if I went back, I'd be going somewhere else. So if I ever write about Japan again, I'll probably write about the real Japan, as opposed to the Japan I felt compelled to write about out of my childhood memories.

Chaos as Metaphor: An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro

Peter Oliva / 1995

From *Filling Station Magazine*, no. 9 (Winter 1996). Reprinted by permission of Peter Oliva.

Kazuo Ishiguro might be late for a lunch date. He's expected to meet with a group of Japanese men at the American Booksellers' Convention in Chicago, and "nothing, absolutely nothing," repeats his publisher, "can interfere with his schedule."

After three days of begging, cajoling and negotiating with his publisher, we finally agree that Ishiguro can meet with me for an interview, but this proposed interview must start after his scheduled book signing and finish before his scheduled luncheon.

"How much time will we have?" I ask.

"You'll have to interview him on his way to the trade floor," he says. "About ten or fifteen minutes. He's a very busy man, you know."

We agree that Kazuo Ishiguro is a very busy man (since winning the 1989 Booker Prize with his novel, *The Remains of the Day*) and, by this reasoning, fifteen minutes should be just enough time.

It seems only appropriate that this unscheduled interview should mirror a scene straight from the pages of Ishiguro's latest novel, *The Unconsoled*. The novel follows a famous concert pianist named Ryder, who appears in a small, unnamed city to give the performance of his lifetime. Everything and everyone in the city seems hinged on Ryder's upcoming performance, on his many unscheduled social engagements, and on the content of a speech Ryder is scheduled to give about a city he can hardly remember.

The problem at hand: Ryder has lost his schedule. Fumbling through his appointments—guessing the significance of absolutely everyone he meets—plunges Ryder into an intriguing, sad comedy of errors. Without his all-important schedule, for example, Ryder doesn't seem to even recognize his own family, until he gets some whiff of recognition, some clue that inevitably

winds him up and points him in the right direction, toward a further fumble and his next (supposed) appointment.

The novel maintains this precarious balance of narrative ambiguity all the way to page 424, when—quite suddenly—hope seems to loom in the future. Ryder's concert is on the threshold of answering everyone's life-long problem, solving every misunderstanding with all the precision and grace of planets swinging into alignment (briefly) to eclipse the past.

It is this particular moment I ultimately want to discuss with Ishiguro: this wonderful moment in *The Unconsoled* when Ishiguro finally brings all of Ryder's digressions and narrative tangents together, in one fist, only to shake those hopeful expectations loose with dark, characteristic irony. To get to this moment on page 424, I quickly learn that we will have to wade through Ryder's misadventures and intriguing shifts of perspective, if only to give the novel a context, a background and a set of rules. But I'm going to get to this page, I tell myself. *The Unconsoled* may be a sad, comic place, but I'm determined to find out how Ishiguro can be so bold as to crush so many narrative expectations so neatly, so irreverently.

I have ten to fifteen minutes, a note pad of questions and a hand-held dictation recorder that I give him as soon as our hands meet. As we walk from his signing booth to the main building, we are knocked from side to side by passing, pedestrian booksellers in crowded, windowless hallways. I look up from my notebook to avoid at least three head-on collisions. Ishiguro pushes me into a wall and saves us both from the projected path of one low-flying wheelchair. And I try (only marginally) to glimpse his publisher's red hair ahead of us, leading the way.

PO: Okay, the mic is on, just talk into the top of the machine.
KI: These are the kinds of crazy things that happen at conventions.

PO: I have to say it: I feel a little like one of your characters in your novel, tracking you down from the remains of a misplaced schedule.
KI: (laughs) Well, we all have a bunch of schedules inside us, I suppose.

PO: But this, perhaps, is a more personal schedule. Is there any relation to the musician, Ryder, in your novel to Ishiguro, the author on tour?
KI: Only a superficial thing. I used some of that chaos of being on tour as a metaphor. It was available, so like a lot of things that are available,

I used them. But it's not supposed to be only that. I also happen to be on tour.

PO: It would be the worst author tour imaginable.
KI: Well, I don't think that an author tour is sufficiently interesting for people to read about it. The book is supposed to be a metaphor for the way most of us have lives that we blunder through, pretending we know where we're going but not really knowing where we're going.

PO: But the musician in the book, Ryder, he is not solely a man who blunders through his life. He doesn't even seem to know his family on arrival; he gets sent to them through another character, the baggage handler at the hotel, and he must piece all their lives together.
KI: Yeah.

PO: It's almost as if his memory is out of whack.
KI: His memory doesn't work in the usual way but I was trying to do something a bit odd here. I was trying to compress the way most of us go through a lifetime just in those few days. So it's a bit like that experience of getting to a certain point in your life and suddenly finding that you've got various people attached to you, wondering, not quite knowing, how you got into that situation. It's that sort of thing, except here it happens literally. I mean: the whole thing takes place. I wanted to use that kind of dream world to express it. It's not literally a dream, but I wanted to use some of the things that happen in dreams, which I thought most people will be—on some level—familiar with. You know, the experience. Because they've operated in that dream world, so a number of strange things happen like that. His memory is funny.

PO: He is also an omniscient narrator who is completely untrustworthy.
KI: He is omniscient in some ways, but he is incredibly restricted in others. He might have access to other people's memories but sometimes he can't even remember very basic things.

PO: Was that a hard balance to maintain? Was that one of the major challenges you faced in writing this book?
KI: It was one of them. But the major challenge in writing this book was to actually figure out a set of rules that govern the world that the book takes place in.

PO: What do you mean by an alternative set of rules?
KI: The rules that apply to time, to human behavior, social behavior, in the world of this book, that are different from the ones that apply in our life. Time-sense distances, space relationships, even human beings behave in a different way. Memory behaves in a different way. But it was very important to me that there should be rules and that the reader wants to be acclimatized to this new world. There should be a framework. It shouldn't be just a wild place, where anything can happen.

PO: What do you call those tangents, those narrative excursions, childhood memories and digressions that Ryder gives the reader?
KI: It is a kind of tangent but the word I've been using in England where I've been talking about the book is "appropriation." Because it's not just a tangent. It's like in a dream when you use—when you might see somebody—your milkman, whoever, your grocer, somebody who pops up in your dream but actually that person is standing for somebody much more important from your past. In other words, you are appropriating people you run into in the present to stand for somebody deeper in your psyche, in your past, in your personal history. That's partly what's happening here. These people that he runs into, they do exist in their own right, in this city, to some extent, but he's using them, in this kind of strange way, to tell you the story, about his own life, so you really learn about him, and his parents and his childhood and indeed what he fears he might become.

PO: Is he the Unconsoled?
KI: He is the Unconsoled. He's got this idea that if he becomes a great enough pianist, if he gives the greatest concert ever, one day, everything that went wrong in the past will get healed. He has this kind of irrational idea. And I think this is a time when he discovers that you can't go back to fix things. Sometimes things are broken forever.

(Having arrived on the trade floor, we notice five Japanese men bowing frantically in our direction. Ishiguro's red-haired publisher is standing next to them, examining his wristwatch in an effort to hurry us along. We are only a few meters from all these bowing, wristwatch-watching gentlemen, so my question about page 424 seems a ridiculously long ways away. I look at Ishiguro and he's holding out his hand, trying to give me back the recorder.

Still, there might be just enough time to ask one quick question. What about that moment, I want to ask, when everything is on the verge of working out . . .)

PO: What's your writing schedule like?
KI: Well, I plan a lot. I go thorough this period where I don't write words; I just prepare. But I try to be fairly disciplined about it. I work a kind of nine-to-five type of thing. Sometimes I spill into the evening. Other days I don't do anything.

KI: (Shrugging his shoulders) I'm going to have to go now.

PO: That's about it, I guess.

June 1995

Rooted in a Small Space: An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro

Dylan Otto Krider / 1998

From *The Kenyon Review*, New Series, vol. XX, no. 2 (1998). Reprinted by permission of Dylan Otto Krider.

We are meeting at the Four Seasons Hotel in downtown Chicago's Gold Coast district, the perfect setting for an interview with Kazuo Ishiguro, straight out of his novel *The Unconsoled.* It has everything, right down to the antique furniture and uniformed man eyeing me from his post beneath the green awning. I halfway expect to see the narrator, Mr. Ryder, stumble through the doorway. As soon as the thought is completed, a man does enter: although in his forties, he has the look of a grad student, lean, head hunched forward, looking as out of place here as I do. It is Kazuo Ishiguro. Once our greetings are made and we are inside the elevator, he unfolds a paper schedule and says, "Just like Mr. Ryder," so he sees the parallels, too.

In the world of *The Unconsoled*, elevator rides can take twenty minutes, strangers can turn out to be your wife or son, and a downtown hotel lobby can be behind the door of a secluded country home. In the novel, from the moment Mr. Ryder, a world-renowned pianist, arrives at the hotel, he is incessantly drawn away by various townspeople to perform strange, inane tasks, often conflicting with a schedule he never actually sees. One of the first deviations occurs when a young, aspiring musician, Stephan Hoffman, intrudes on Mr. Ryder as he is having a cup of coffee in the atrium, as we are about to do. Luckily, Ishiguro offers to do the interview in his room, and I quickly agree, thankful to break the curse.

Inside, someone has left a pot of green tea brewing. Ishiguro seems amused by the Japanese ink drawings that adorn the walls. As I set up the tape recorder, he moves on to the hotel directory, written in Japanese. "I can't read a word of this," he chuckles, flipping through the pages with a kind of amused resignation. These are obviously the sort of assumptions made routinely about a man raised since early childhood in Great Britain with the

name Kazuo Ishiguro. An assumption made, it occurs to me, not just by hotel staff, but by readers of his fiction as well.

Dylan Otto Krider: I heard you originally wanted to become a rock musician. . . .
Kazuo Ishiguro: Not exactly a rock musician. I was never really into out-and-out rock 'n' roll. I wrote these sensitive songs that I played on the acoustic guitar. I think I first became interested in words being used in a literary way through Dylan. I listened very carefully to his lyrics.

DOK: So did your appreciation of music center around the lyrics rather than the instrumentals?
KI: I liked the whole thing, but lyrics were a very important component of that kind of music. Songs young people often listened to at that time definitely carried some kind of message in a very literal sense, and part of the idea was that the lyrics be obscure so that adults wouldn't be able to understand it. I did the whole business of taking around demo tapes, and I think I gave up having any serious career ambitions when I was about twenty-two or twenty-three. It sounds bad to say I outgrew that form because that suggests it is somehow inferior; I just didn't have the talent to take that thing any further. What I wanted to do seemed to lead me naturally to writing short stories.

I signed up to do a creative writing degree [at the University of East Anglia] when I was twenty-four because it looked like less work—you handed in a piece of fiction rather than a scholarly thesis at the end of the year. When I was accepted, I had a bit of a mild panic. I was accepted in the summer to start in the fall, and in that space of time, I taught myself to write short stories so I wouldn't be humiliated when I got up there. By the end of that year, I'd published all the short stories I had written—I had only written about three—and I got a contract to finish my first novel from the people who are still my publishers today. So after years of total failure as a musician, as soon as I had a go at writing, all my stories sold. So although I never really wanted to be a writer, that's where I felt I got permission to do these things.

DOK: Do you think there is universality among the art forms?
KI: It feels like that. It doesn't feel like I made any kind of major jump. The internal experience of it was the same, and there was this particular thing that was developing that just naturally steeled over into writing short stories and

then into novels. I can see a very clear line there. Also, there are many things I learned as a musician which I can see young writers going through in their fiction. Sometimes in small literary magazines, I see young writers who may well go on to do very good stuff, but I can actually recognize the same things from my songwriting days. To give you an example, I went through my kind of intense autobiographical phase in my song writing, and I also went through my wild-purple-prose phase, and then that kind of weird, experimental phase. And that important distinction between showing off your technical accomplishments on the one hand and proper artistic expression on the other is something I worked through a lot. When you're learning an instrument, the technique is much more obvious, and a typical failing of many musicians is doing things that are flashy to demonstrate their prowess. After a while you begin to sort out the people who can play beautiful music from the people who can play very fast, and I think that certainly had some influence on me when I started to write fiction. If this artistic endeavor requires some kind of flashiness, OK fine, but this thing of asking yourself the whole time, are you playing this lick just to impress other people who can't play, or are you playing it because there is an emotional effect that you want? That's a question you ask yourself all the time, if you're a professional musician. You start thinking much more in terms of expressing emotions, and that starts to become second nature.

DOK: How does this translate into *The Unconsoled*, where you're trying some very unusual things? Actually, it might take some readers a while to catch on to what exactly is going on in this book, until the scene in the theater where they were watching *2001*, and Clint Eastwood is in it. . . .
KI: That was a mistake. I really think that was a bad mistake.

DOK: Really?
KI: Yeah, a lot of people have asked me since, "Did you know that Clint Eastwood wasn't in that movie?" Even the editor faxed me to say, "You know, I've checked up on this and Clint Eastwood wasn't in this movie. . . ." It's the one place in the book you can actually point to where there is a difference between the book and reality in real life.

DOK: I thought that was on purpose. I thought that was just for your slower readers who hadn't caught on yet, so that when they get to that point, they can say, "Oh, yeah. This isn't our world."

KI: I suppose I would have preferred it if people couldn't have put their finger on what was going on. I often referred to the language of dream; when I see movies in my dreams, they are sort of versions of the real films, but they have different actors in them, so that's why I did it. In hindsight, it's too clear a divergence from the real. But getting back to what we were saying, in writing *The Unconsoled*, I was very conscious of that question the whole time: am I just doing something to show off a new technical accomplishment, or is this literature and artistic expression? Because I tried so many new things technically, I certainly didn't feel as much in control of that issue as when, say, I wrote *Remains of the Day* using techniques I was very, very familiar with. To some extent the excitement of executing things cleverly had worn off by the time I had written *Remains of the Day*. It was no big deal to me to pull off this trick or that trick, so that kind of prevents you from doing something just to do it; you only do it because it's really what's required. In *The Unconsoled*, I was trying so many things for the first time, I think perhaps here and there I probably did err on the side of playing a lick simply because nobody had ever played such a lick before.

[The doorbell rings. A bellhop hands Ishiguro a stack of what looks like folded satin sheets. When the door is shut again, Ishiguro lets the material drop, which unfurls into a blue, silk kimono.]

KI: Boy, they really court the Japanese clientele, don't they? [laughs]

DOK: Actually, this is one of the things I wanted to talk to you about. Your first two books dealt with Japanese characters and Japan, and I know that because your name is so obviously Japanese, people may have a lot of preconceived notions about your work. Is this something you were trying to get away from when you wrote *The Unconsoled*?
KI: By the time I wrote *The Unconsoled*, that had ceased to be much of an issue. *The Remains of the Day*, that was a conscious decision not to write another book set in Japan. In the first two books, I very much wanted to appeal to the Japanese side of me. But by the time the second novel came out and I was starting to get known in Great Britain, I was very conscious that I was getting cast in this role as a kind of Japanese foreign correspondent in residence in London. Newspapers and magazines would call me up because there was a Japanese book to be reviewed or a Japanese issue that I could

comment on, and I started to feel very uncomfortable because I knew very little about Japan.

DOK: You left Japan when you were very young . . .
KI: Yeah, yeah. I lived in England practically the whole time. Obviously I knew more about Japan than just some regular English guy who lived in England, but I probably didn't know much more than someone who had just developed a keen interest in Japanese culture. I suppose that isn't entirely true. I was brought up by Japanese parents. I think I understood very deeply how a Japanese family works and about parent/child relationships, marriages, and so on. But I wasn't qualified to comment on the economic situation in Japan or what Japanese people did or didn't do in the '80s. These books were very much my own creations, and as a novelist, I was wanting to write about universal themes, so it always slightly annoyed me when people said, "Oh, how interesting it must be to be Japanese because you feel this, this, and this," and I thought, "Don't we all feel like this?" So I made the conscious decision to do the next book away from Japan, and I felt a great sense of liberation. There was a part of me that wanted to find out if my acceptance was conditioned on the fact that I was acting as mediator to Japanese culture. I wanted to see if people could appreciate me purely as a novelist as opposed to a Japanese novelist.

DOK: How much research did you do for the first two books, or did you basically rely on memory?
KI: I basically relied on memory. I obviously looked in the history books once I figured out the story and was in the process of fine tuning. Over the years, being Japanese, I naturally absorbed a hell of a lot of information about Japan and Japanese history. Actually, until I was about twenty, I did a lot of reading about Japan and whenever there was a Japanese movie, I would go see it. Looking back now, it had a lot to do with my wanting to write at all. Japan was a very strong place for me because I always believed I would eventually return there, but as it turned out, I never went back. This very important place called Japan which was a mixture of memory, speculation, and imagination was fading with every year that went by. I think there was a very urgent need for me to get it down on paper before it disappeared altogether.

DOK: How much obligation do writers have to accurately portray the particular time and place that they write about?

KI: This is something that has always troubled me quite a lot. As I explained, there were a lot of people looking to my early books. In Britain, where there's not much literature written about Japan—certainly in fiction there isn't—people were saying, "Oh, now I know what it was like to live through the militarist period of Japan." I was in shock. I've always been very conscious that I'm not like Primo Levi who was a prisoner at Auschwitz and then wrote all these books about the Auschwitz experience. To take him as an extreme example, here's someone who actually lived through a crucial period of history, and found a big need to bear witness to it. I'm not somebody who lived through the experience and was looking to pass it on. In many ways I felt I was using history as a piece of orchestration to bring out my themes. I'm not sure that I ever distorted anything major, but my first priority was not to portray history accurately. Japan and militarism, now these are big, important questions, and it always made me uneasy that my books were being used as a sort of historical text. With *Remains of the Day*, I certainly felt a lot more license. It was one thing to misrepresent what happened to a whole nation and the militaristic fervor, it's another to misrepresent how butlers ran their lives.

DOK: How far can you go with this license? Could you write about a character with experiences very different from your own? Could you write about a character who was, say, a Muslim?

KI: I don't think I could. I don't really have close friends who are Muslim. It's not something I understand in even a superficial way. I think I would have serious misgivings about trying to portray a character . . . unless it's just an incidental kind of role. I usually come at it from another way. I feel I can really only write about these emotions and feelings that I'm familiar with and have experienced in some depth. I usually start with those, but then I put these feelings or these issues into roles that might otherwise be quite foreign, like the role of the butler, and rearrange that role accordingly. That's how I've always operated in the past. I may one day find a reason to create a Muslim character if it occurs to me that the theme would be best expressed through the use of a Muslim character. Then I'd have this whole burden of doing some research so as not to misrepresent or be misleading, given that it is such a sensitive issue. There the responsibility would be far greater than towards, well, butlers. . . . [laughs].

You know, it's a funny thing, after the publication of *The Remains of the Day* a number of butlers wrote to me from that older generation that worked for those lords, and I was actually suddenly reminded that even in the world of butlers, there is some responsibility. But I think it's interesting, the three or four butlers who wrote to me were very positive about it. They didn't feel they had been misrepresented or lampooned or anything. My attitude is, as a writer of fiction you should have quite a lot of license to go and change things and muck around a little bit. However, there comes a point when that license stops and you're actually going to start being misleading about important historical and factual things. Until you cross that line, I'm all for not bothering too much about journalistic accuracy because that's not what is important.

DOK: In *The Unconsoled*, there's not really a danger of offending in that way, is there?

KI: Well, it's interesting. Even with *The Remains of the Day*, though it was set in the world of butlers, I still had a little bit of that problem, people saying, "Here is an interesting portrait, a re-creation of the life of a servant in England between the wars." Particularly when the movie came out, people thought that this was a documentary work, and I was keen to write a book that was so strange that no one would mistake it for anything other than some expression of something I was thinking or feeling. Still, I think this tendency to want to tie things down is quite strong, even with *The Unconsoled*. I've read some reviews that say it's a thinly veiled allegory about the collapse of communism. [laughs]

It was very late in the day that I decided to use Germanic names. In a way I could change them all to Scandinavian names, or even French names. You know, I'd have to change a few details, the style of certain houses or whatever, but you could almost set that thing down anywhere. It was by and large a landscape of imagination.

DOK: You used the term "landscape of imagination." People usually describe it as "dream-like," but I was never entirely satisfied with that. I suppose it is like a dream in that it all seems to be very much of one mind, as is any work of fiction. Writers often do their best to create the illusion that things are random, and people act independently the way people actually do, but it's still all the work of one mind—the author's—as a dream is all influenced by the mind of the dreamer. You just dropped the pretense.

KI: I did consciously refer to dream a lot of the time. Having said that, I've always found other people's dreams very boring. I think part of the reason is

that a world in which anything, virtually, can happen is a world in which most things are meaningless. I think that it is very important to have some kind of laws, just as you do in the waking world, that will maintain consistency throughout. They are different rules from the ones that govern realistic fiction, but I wanted the reader to feel, after the initial period of confusion, that there were new laws. I guess a test of this is to ask: is anything possible in the world of *The Unconsoled*? Well, probably not. If Ryder or any of the characters suddenly grew wings and flew off on page 300, I think that would seem as wrong as it would in, say, a Henry James novel. So although a lot of strange things happen in *The Unconsoled*, there are only really about eight or nine ways in which they are strange. So it is dream-like in that sense. It's like what you just said, there's no pretense at the omniscience of a detached writer, saying here's this character, here's that character. It basically says here's a world that is seen so much from the point of view of one consciousness that it very boldly appropriates things that it finds to serve its needs. Mr. Ryder can turn certain characters into people from his past, and bend and twist the whole world around into being some big expression of his feelings and emotions. Instead of using the more conventional methods like flashbacks, where you just learn about somebody's life from this point to that point, here, I thought, you could do it in a very different way, where someone apparently stumbles into this landscape in which everything is an expression of his past and his fears for the future.

DOK: For example, there is the woman whom he has never met before that turns out to be his wife. Some reviewers have been tempted to describe this as amnesia, but it's more that Mr. Ryder's past hasn't been written yet, isn't it? As you said, this story is written according to his needs. . . .
KI: Yeah, I've never been happy when people have said he's got amnesia. [laughs] That seems like it's trying to be a very real-world explanation for what's going on. That happens. If the flashback method is like shining a flashlight into the darkness of your past, and illuminating bits of it to decipher, then this is more like a completely dark room where someone moves along with a torch like this . . . [He moves his hand along the length of the coffee table as if reading with a magnifying glass]. See, there's a little patch of light you can see, but you can't see what's before it unless you move back to see what you just passed. I had that image in mind, where Ryder can remember the things that have happened before him, but the things that have

happened just before that have already started to merge into the darkness. He can see before him a little bit, but not too far. The thing about his wife, it's not really that he's forgotten his wife—I felt many things in life were like this. We go through life rather like this guy goes through these four or five days. He's very aware of this patch as he's moving along, but it's an illusion to think that we carefully plan our lives. It's more that we blunder through, and every now and then we stop to take stock. We suddenly wonder, "How did this happen? I'm here living in this place, working at this job, married to this person, but come to think of it, I've always lived like this." You're pushed around by other people's agendas and accidents, all this time making an effort to say, "Yes, I decided this consciously." We tend to think we're in far more control than we are.

Often Ryder looks a bit odd because he promises a kid something and then turns around and forgets. Over the course of a lifetime, we do this the whole time. You promise friends that you'll always be friends, or spouses that you'll always be together; or that you're going to live a certain way, and then you meet that same person five or six years later and they're doing something completely different. You don't think that they are completely mad or amnesiac or something, but just that that's the way life is because five or six years have passed. It's only when you look at it from a certain perspective and compress it into a few days that it starts to look like very strange behavior.

DOK: You said before that you're attracted to universal themes. Can you elaborate?
KI: I just mean themes that most people can relate to as opposed to themes that are only of interest to a few. If I were writing a book about British politics in the '60s, there are probably quite a few people in Britain who might be interested in that, but you probably wouldn't be, nor would the French people. I do think there are themes or issues that are very urgent locally or to a particular time or place, and I think it's important to address them, but as a novelist, I suppose I'm interested in writing things that will be of interest to people in fifty years' time, a hundred years' time, and to people in lots of different cultures.

When I wrote that first novel, I couldn't quite believe it was going to be published anyway, and I certainly didn't think beyond the group of people I happened to know. When it got published, here it was in the bookstore and I thought, God, anyone could read this. Then when it started to get translated,

there was a mild feeling of panic, and I wanted to reread everything to see how it would look from the point of view of some old lady in Finland or something. Then having to go around the world and account for why I did certain things as I am doing now, but in lots of different cultural contexts—to people in Sweden or people in Japan or wherever—it does kind of remind me that the next time I'm sitting down writing, if I want to continue being interesting to all these people, I have to write things that are universal.

DOK: Do you think we're getting more global in our thinking?
KI: Well, yeah, I guess so.

DOK: There seems to be a lot more travel now, and we do seem to be much more connected. There is much more exposure to other cultures. . . .
KI: Well, there certainly is a lot more travel . . . I suppose whether you're looking in the area of international business and economics or international culture, it's very difficult to talk about these things sensibly by looking at just one country. You have to necessarily address the whole global picture. I think there are dangers of this. There's this Eastern European professor, George Steiner, who has written about his fears that Anglo-American culture is just taking over the world, and that we'll go from having all these vital, interesting different cultures to having this one great blanket just spreading over the whole world, and that this will swamp the natural vitality that is coming from things. I suppose there might be that danger, but I think to some extent it's exaggerated. I think there is a more global culture around, simply because there are, to use the computer jargon, far more sites where all these things can take place together. You can far more readily see movies from around the world, and read books from around the world, than even twenty years ago. So, in a way, I think there is a certain danger of things getting a bit homogeneous. But on the other hand I think it's healthy in that it goes against people becoming very provincial, as in England. I think it's quite a good thing if writers, as a matter of course, feel they have to address an international audience rather than just writing about what's going on in their town or circle of friends. I mean, it's fine to write about your town and your circle of friends as long as you're aware that you're addressing the larger world. Often, I think international books are rooted in a very small place.

Kazuo Ishiguro: The Sorbonne Lecture

François Gallix / 1999

From *Études britanniques contemporaines*, no. 18 (June 2000). Text transcribed by Céline Leroy, Nathalie Massoulier, Linda Troller, edited by François Gallix and Peter Home. Reprinted by permission of *Études britanniques contemporaines*.

Kazuo Ishiguro was born in Nagasaki in 1954, nine years after the second American atomic bomb on Japan. He once declared to *The Observer*: "When I was a child, I thought every town had a bomb" (May 14, 1989). He arrived in England when he was five where his parents settled in Guildford (P. G. Wodehouse's birthtown). It was their intention to go back to Japan after one or two years and the young boy was given some sort of Japanese culture in view of his return. They in fact remained in England and, like Salman Rushdie, Kazuo Ishiguro had a very classical British education. At the University of East Anglia, he did an M.A. under the supervision of Malcolm Bradbury, and Angela Carter was one of his teachers. Before that he had written about one hundred rock songs which he played in the tube and in clubs, accompanying himself with the guitar. Kazuo Ishiguro has written four novels: *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), *The Remains of the Day* (Booker Prize in 1989, adapted for the screen by James Ivory in 1993), *The Unconsoled* (1995). His latest novel, *When We Were Orphans*, was published in April 2000.

Kazuo Ishiguro was invited to give a talk at the Sorbonne by the research centre "Écritures du roman contemporain de langue anglaise" with the help of the British Council on 9th December 1999, salle Louis Liard. The occasion was the fact that *The Remains of the Day* was part of the yearly syllabus for the agrégation competitive examination in France.

François Gallix: My first question is about this "gentleman's gentleman's" voice we hear from the title of *The Remains of the Day* to the last word of the book. Stevens's very puzzling discourse: cold, obsolete, emotionless, stilted, without the least sense of humour. Where did you get it from? Of course,

many British readers immediately thought of Jeeves and P. G. Wodehouse, Lord Darlington often sounding like Bertie Wooster.

The critic Pico Iyer wrote that your butler was so English that he could be Japanese in almost everything he did. He added: "[. . .] sometimes when Stevens addresses his dying parent as 'Father' or when Miss Kenton delivers sentences like 'Is that so, Mr Stevens?' his narrative might be almost translated from the Japanese" (Iyer, 587). How did you immerse yourself so successfully in this fictional language?

Kazuo Ishiguro: To answer that question, I have to go back to when I started to write. *The Remains of the Day* was my third novel. When I wrote my first novel, *A Pale View of Hills,* I wasn't aware of style at all, or I didn't pay any attention to this question of the narrative voice. I was struggling to write as clearly and as neatly as possible. I was quite unself-conscious about what sort of characteristics the voice of the narrator would have. I had a bit of a shock when the book was published and every reviewer praised this very carefully constructed voice. This was said over and over again and I was always praised for this emotionally-controlled voice. So, I was quite pleased to say: "Yes, it was quite difficult to put this together." But then, of course, in my quieter moments, I started to get slightly concerned because this was just a natural voice. I was just trying to write in a normal way. And it happened again with my second novel: *An Artist of the Floating World.* It is quite a different character and the subject-matter is very different. Again, the reviews came out and praised the emotionally-controlled, stilted kind of voice. So I came to the painful conclusion that perhaps this was something to do with me.

François Gallix: It must be so because they all stressed the fact that these novels took place in Japan, or partly in Japan.

Kazuo Ishiguro: Yes, there was an accidental fact too, here. I was obliged to create Japanese narrators speaking ostensibly in Japanese although the text would be in English because I was writing in English. So, I had to create a kind of a subtitled language, something that almost suggested that it was a translation. I couldn't have a Japanese narrator coming up with lots of English colloqualisms. I needed to give the impression that the reader, through the English language, was actually reading Japanese, particularly in the dialogue sections. To some extent, it contributed to this tone that I was praised for. I think it is an interesting thing that happens to writers or artists of all kinds. You learn something about yourself from the way people react to your work. Now, *The Remains of the Day* was the first time I deliberately decided consciously to stick to the exercise, thinking: "Because people keep finding these qualities in this voice, this book I will write will actually be about these things to some extent." It was the first time I used this voice to explore these very things we talked about. So, I would say *The Remains of the Day* was very much a case of building a voice that explored these qualities I had first been shown quite unconsciously. And I suppose that somewhere I feared it was something that was in me. In that sense, although *The Remains of the Day* is not autobiographical in any sense, there is some small part of me in it. Perhaps it is not something that people will notice, but it is a small part of me that I exaggerate and create a kind of monster out of. Yes, I looked at these things: coldness, a fear of the world of emotions, and this urge to control everything through professionalism, through technical ability. So, I would say that the voice was, in the case of my third book, a very consciously constructed thing but I arrived at it in this rather odd way.

François Gallix: You did it in a crafty way because obviously when we read and re-read your book we know right away that you don't share most of Stevens's ideas in fact. And yet you managed to keep this tone throughout, from the beginning to the end. It must be quite difficult to impersonate someone you more or less perhaps disagree with, at least part of the time.

Kazuo Ishiguro: Well, for me, I think it's easier in a way. I've always found it easier to write about, or to use first-person narrators as characters that are, on the surface, very different from me. The problem I have is when I'm not sure to what extent the character is me. I remember early on, when I first tried to write fiction, I tried to write about characters rather like myself, living in a world like the one I was living in. And I found this a great problem, everything was seeming very banal. It is only when I realized this paradox: in an odd sort of way, when you talk about life through characters who are quite different from you, on the surface—perhaps of a completely different age, living in a different country, in a different era, of a different sex—paradoxically I find I become less inhibited. I can express myself much more honestly and openly through these characters. Perhaps simply because there is not this danger of people thinking it's me. Also I think it's because you can focus much more clearly on what it is that interests you about a particular character. You don't bring this whole baggage of yourself into a character. And in any case, from a technical point of view, I think the difficulty of impersonating

in that way, this kind of ventriloquism, is rather overrated. It's not that difficult, actually. And you see actors improvising characters, often in one-man shows, they do a different show every night. They might play Lenny Bruce or something like this and the script is improvised. It's not difficult once you know the character and once you know how that person speaks.

François Gallix: If we could go from this voice then to those who listen to these voices, that is the readers. You said in an interview, "I am interested in the way words hide meaning. . . . The language I use tends to be the sort that actually suppresses meaning and tries to hide away meaning" (Vorda 135–36). Do you think that by so doing, you have created an Ishigurian reader, a suspicious reader (somewhat comparable to the reader of some detective stories) expecting to read between the lines, prepared to consider carefully what an unreliable narrator might say, looking for the unsaid, a schizoid reader who knows how to jump from the '20s and '30s to the '50s on the same page.
Kazuo Ishiguro: I'm sure it's not unique to just readers of my books. I would like to think that readers have become increasingly sophisticated over the years. It could be all people reading literature. And I think we should, of course, all read in this way. In fact, when we listen to people on the television, or when we talk to each other, I'm sure we do this. We don't take everything people say at face value, particularly if you're listening to politicians! And I think particularly in the West, in democracies, in an age of mass communication, we've become very sophisticated at deconstructing people's presentations in advertisements, in politicians' speeches, or in chat shows. We learn to take the literal meaning of what they are saying and, of course, we go away, thinking, "Ah! what an interesting person! They are obviously very worried about these things, they are very insecure." I think we are all finely tuned about these things and I don't think I expect too much of readers if I ask them not to take anything at face value. In general, I think this is a good way to read, I like to read things like that. When you encounter a character in my books and in many other people's books you have to exercise these faculties that you would exercise as an intelligent person in life. I feel quite happy with that.

François Gallix: So, you have a reader in mind and he is or she is definitely a suspicious reader.
Kazuo Ishiguro: I suppose that for the suspicious aspect, as you say, particularly in the first three books, and in *The Remains of the Day* in particular, it becomes very clear that we are not reading the narrator's words in order to find out the plot of what happened. We are really witnessing someone playing a kind of hide-and-seek with himself, his memories and his conscience. That's what the book is about. It's not about the actual events so much as how a person comes to evaluate what happened—a person struggling with himself. You're just looking in on a person telling himself these stories and changing it slightly, changing this memory and trying to justify what he did. It's that that interests me.

I must say I am rather bored with unreliable narrators who are perhaps just psychopaths or something like this. You suddenly discover on page 200 that he is in an insane asylum. It gives you a little jolt and perhaps it points out a rather obvious fact: that you are reading a novel. I'm really only interested in unreliable narrators in so far as they have very interesting reasons for being unreliable, the deep reasons why we all have to be unreliable narrators. Because most of us when we look at ourselves, we have to be rather unreliable in order to face ourselves. So, it's these serious reasons for being unreliable that interest me. How to hold on to your dignity when you think your life has been a failure. How you wrestle with things that you regret having done. The unreliability that comes up to those things interests me.

François Gallix: This will be my last question. It's a question about history. And I'm quoting an article from *Le Monde* (23/02/90) by Nicole Zand who wrote: "There is in Ishiguro, born in 1954, something of a Patrick Modiano, an obsession with troubled periods which they were born too late to have lived through and that have left an indelible mark on their lives." So, the question is about your own vision of history and about its inclusion in your fiction and particularly in *The Remains of the Day*, but not only. This idea, in fact, of having to bring back to your memory events that yourself couldn't have lived through, simply because of your age.
Kazuo Ishiguro: This question about the relationship to history is a very interesting area. I think it is particularly interesting for writers of my generation. I am forty-five years old. It applies to people who are also slightly older than me, too. A few years ago, I would have had a fairly simple answer to this question. I felt I had always used history almost as another kind of technical device. I always thought I was profoundly different from—say—a writer like Primo Levi, somebody who experiences something crucial to our history and who feels the urge to bear witness to it. I always thought that I and also other writers of my generation were almost like movie-makers, looking for

location. We have a story and we look through our history books for a period and a place where this story could really come to life.

Alternatively, we may just look through history and think: "This is a very interesting period, I'm interested in it. I'll write a novel." And to some extent—I don't know if this is the case here in France—in Britain, in the late '70s and early '80s, there was a kind of an inferiority complex on the part of the younger new emerging writers. The inferiority complex was this: that we lived in a very safe, affluent, boring country. And if we just wrote about our lives, what was going on on our doorstep, if we simply wrote about British life—as generations of writers had done before us—we would write a very small, provincial novel. We were aware that many people around the world had started to regard the modern British novel as being very inward-looking, obsessed with class, that nobody else was interested in. I think this had something to do with the fact that the British Empire had collapsed and that for many generations, British writers did not have to worry about being provincial. You could write about the British class system and it was automatically of global importance because of the huge Empire. I think Americans are now in this position. They can write a very inward-looking novel about going to night-clubs in Manhattan. It should be of interest for everybody around the world because of the dominance of American culture.

The British had this attitude for a long, long time. Perhaps it was this generation who came after the war who had suddenly realized that Britain was just British society, that it was suddenly very small and that the big questions of the age, in those days about communism and capitalism, or the third world, the South and the North, were somewhere else. Writers writing in East Germany, in Africa had it ready-made. Here we were in this quiet little place, what could we do? I think the answer a lot of us had was: you will either set books in Africa or in Eastern Europe—and some people did—or you look back through history and go to the last time, when everything was fragmented, when everything—democracy, stability—was really at risk. It's no coincidence if you often find a lot of writers who emerged in Britain in the '80s: Salman Rushdie, Graham Swift, Ian McEwan, you find them going back again and again to the war and more recently to the first world war (people like Sebastian Faulks, Pat Barker).

I'm sorry it's such a long answer but for a long time I wrestled with this because I thought there was something slightly wrong about this use of history, there was something insincere. In my own case, I was very aware that—particularly for my first book—I had used the associations that come

up from Nagasaki and the atomic bomb for my purposes. I felt very uneasy about this. And there certainly was a time when I felt it possible to have a kind of pornography of seriousness. It is very easy to give your novel an easy kind of weight, simply by referring to the holocaust or to the atomic bomb, or to the war. You just bring this in and what would have been otherwise a banal story suddenly claims importance. That always makes me uneasy.

But I think my answer today will be slightly different. Recently, I have become very aware that the older generation, my parents' generation who lived through the war is actually dying. Just two months ago, I visited the Auschwitz camp in Poland just to have a look and this was very much the question that the International Auschwitz Committee was trying to address. How to keep the lessons of this rather awful century we've had when the people who have actually experienced it at first hand are now passing away. Of course, to people who are voting for the first time this year or next year, even the cold war is a thing of a distant memory. And suddenly, I feel that it's my generation who perhaps now has to carry on the responsibility of keeping the memories of what happened earlier in the century because we are now the best there is, we are a distant link to the war through our parents and what our parents told us. We have grown up as children in a climate very much of the postwar era and through the cold war era. I've had recently the feeling that there is an added responsibility now. Suddenly perhaps we can't just use history any more but there are some responsibilities now falling on our shoulders as the older generation dies off.

François Gallix: It brings us back to the '30s in fact, when something rather similar happened about the first world war that writers wrote about and had not lived through, but just heard from the previous generation.

So now, it is time for the audience to ask questions.

Question: Actually, you have partially answered my question. François Gallix said earlier that Stevens misses the point—emotionally and politically as well. If I remember well, in an interview, you said that we were all butlers. So my question is: is your novel somehow, amongst other things, about political commitment?

Kazuo Ishiguro: Yes, I remember saying that we were all butlers. I probably said it in America actually. You have to say things like that in America. You have to say these neat, quick things in America to make people pay attention.

You see . . . the book I wrote before *The Remains of the Day* was just very much about the relationship of a personal career to politics. I was interested in this question: "How can you waste your life?" I was interested in looking at how easy it was for somebody very well-meaning and very hard-working, to waste his life. Because he has no real perspective on the political climate in which he operates. And so, earlier I was interested in these people who worked and gave their lives to a career in very peculiar times in Japan, when there were a lot of propaganda and militarism rising. But, by the time I got to *The Remains of the Day*, I wanted to do two things in the book. And one was to explore further this question about being, politically, butlers. And also I wanted to explore the emotional dimension of being, emotionally, butlers.

Since you asked about the political aspect, yes I was . . . What I meant when I said "I think we are all butlers" was simply this: that most of us are not in positions of great power, we don't run huge corporations. We are not presidents of countries. We do our jobs. We do small jobs, big jobs; we do our jobs. And we do our little jobs as best we can and we take our pride and dignity from doing them well. And we offer this up, usually to somebody up there . . . that is our little contribution. We offer it to our employer, perhaps, or to the institution in which we work, perhaps we offer it to a cause . . . but often that is what we are fated to do. We do our very best, we hope this contribution is going to be used for something we approve of. But often, we have very little control. Usually because most of us, we don't have remarkable insight, we don't really see clearly the context in which we work and live. And so that is what most of us do for most of our lives. We try to do our little thing very well, we try to get a sense of it being important and so on. And we offer it to somebody upstairs. But, we are often at the mercy of whoever it is upstairs as to whether our contribution is going to be used for something good or for something not so good. And so, this figure of the butler occured to me as a metaphor. This butler who takes all his pride and dignity from doing something which to most people might look silly and trivial. And he doesn't question who his master is, who it is he is helping. And of course to us, that looks culpable. We are just hoping that Lord Darlington upstairs is a good man and we are offering our contribution in that way. And there is nothing much we can do about that because that is the position most of us are in, in life.

Question: *The Remains of the Day* is really typically British. Sometimes you feel it is too British. I was wondering what kind of education you got once

you arrived in Britain and what kind of connexion you had to that British background that you managed to recreate in your novel.

Kazuo Ishiguro: I should probably say that the England that is represented in *The Remains of the Day* has very little resemblance to the England I grew up in. I never met any butlers at all until I published *The Remains of the Day*, when I started to receive letters from butlers! By the time I arrived in Britain as a child, that kind of Britain where P. G. Wodehouse was born, had disappeared altogether. Of course, I grew up in Guildford as François Gallix said. It is a very affluent middle-class town. In fact I think many statistics say that it is the most affluent town in Britain. And it is a typical, middle-class, very comfortable town, about thirty miles away from London. And in those days, people made a show of being religious and being Christians and going to church, and it was a very respectable middle-class English place. My parents still live there and they have a very distorted view of how England is. They think the whole of England is like this! I think you are quite right to say that the Britain or the England of *The Remains of the Day* (I make this distinction because I think Scotland and Wales are something else), the England of *The Remains of the Day* is too English. I put together that England very consciously, it is a kind of mythical England. It is not an England that most of my English readers would recognize from their own experience. To some extent, I did it really to play into the kind of mythical England that is being sold by the English Heritage industry. You know, when you go as a tourist to England—National Trust or whatever—you are almost buying the idea of this kind of England of grand houses and these cold butlers and people having tea and sandwiches on the lawn and all these very elegant upper-class people.

There is a nostalgia industry and to some extent I just wanted to play with those stereotypes, partly because it was enjoyable to recreate that world of Wodehouse, but also to subvert it, to turn that myth into something slightly different and to suggest that there was a dark side and a cold side to it. So I was very much working with a mythical England, I would say, which is probably why it does seem too English. And it is partly the reason I think the book did very well all around the world. Everyone all over the world, people who have never visited England have this image of England being like that. So it is a kind of international commodity. It is an international myth. Everyone, everywhere, in Africa, in the Far East, has a clear idea of what an English butler is like. And so it is like doing a western, a cowboy film. You create a never-never land but you can say some very interesting things by taking a country's myth or a culture's myth.

Question: When writing in English, do you feel totally at home?
Kazuo Ishiguro: I can't write in Japanese, I should make clear that I am illiterate in Japanese, so I am probably more at home in English than in anything else, but whether I actually feel at home is another matter. Of course I didn't speak English at all until I was five years old and my parents still speak English rather badly. If you met my parents, you would think they were just tourists over from Japan! And so I had to learn the English language very much on my own, just by mixing with friends and picking it up. Now, of course I feel perfectly fluent in it when I am speaking. But when I am writing, there are often colloquial phrases, particularly from an older era, that I am very unsure about, because of course my parents didn't provide me with that kind of background. And so, I think that the kind of carefulness in my narrators that we discussed right at the beginning, to some extent is there perhaps to disguise my own carefulness with the English language. Perhaps I've always had to be quite deliberate about my choice of words. Perhaps because my relationship to the English language has always been a slightly less secure one than would be the case for somedy who was brought up entirely by English parents.

And even now I think, even in my latest book the narrator is English but I think he talks rather like someone in translation, again. I think there is something that draws me to that careful, cautious English. But in some ways, it is no bad thing as a writer. I think there is a danger of being too fluent, so that you don't examine what you say and do quite too much. It is interesting that Samuel Beckett actually decided to write in French because he thought it actually disciplined him. And if you are coming from a very verbose Irish background, I can see some point. It is very easy for your own mastery of the language, your familiarity with the language to actually undermine your artistic intentions.

François Gallix: You spoke about the success of *The Remains of the Day* and the fact that the book was read in many countries. So could I ask you a question in connexion with *The Remains of the Day*, about the idea of "global" literature and also the fact that obviously many people must read your books through translations. You said: "I have to write things that are universal." Does this apply to *The Remains of the Day*, for instance, this idea of a global readership, a global village reading your books?
Kazuo Ishiguro: Yes I think, as I suggested earlier about the English myth, which I thought was a very international myth. To some extent, the kind of

England represented in *The Remains of the Day* is a foreigner's view of England. I think by then, I was very consciously trying to write novels for an international audience. And when I say "consciously," this wasn't because I sat down and worked out a position on this. I think it comes about quite naturally, these days, to writers who are published and who are even modestly successful, particularly if they write in the English language. They are sent all around the world to talk about and promote their translations, as well as of course selling the books in other English-language countries, like America.

When I published my first novel, I never imagined my audience being any bigger than just my friends and I was rather shocked to discover that all kinds of people would be reading it. But when it started to get translated, I got very nervous, I never considered other people reading it. But then I found myself having to go to places like Norway or—let's say Norway, yes, to explain—when I'd spent say two or three days in a hotel, doing lots of interviews, explaining to literary journalists what my book was about, why I wrote in this way and so on. Now, what happens is—after you have done this very intensely for two or three days, sat in a hotel room in Norway talking about your work—you come home and you start to go back to work, on what you are writing. And you can't help every now and again remembering these Norwegians and you stop and you think: "I can't write that, because the Norwegians wouldn't understand." Now, there are all kinds of things the Norwegians wouldn't understand. They wouldn't understand a lot of English puns, for instance. By the time you have translated them, they have disappeared. So the kind of language that relies very much on wordplay, on brilliant use of linguistics, pleasurable and great as it might be in the English language . . . you suddenly think: "Well, it will be just nothing in Norway."

It goes beyond even the linguistic aspect, even for instance when describing a character in terms of what kind of neighbourhood of London he lives in or the fact that he wears clothes from a particular clothes designer, say Paul Smith. Now, to somebody living in England today, if I described a character in those terms, the fact that he lived in a certain neighbourhood of London, let's say Notting Hill and all his clothes were made for him by Paul Smith, that would very clearly label somebody. But of course, the Norwegians wouldn't understand it at all. And similarly, even people living in London in ten years' time would not understand it at all. And so you stop using this technique. You don't describe your characters in terms of such local signals. And I think it starts to get even deeper, even the very subject matter, the

themes, the kind of humour you use, all these things. You start to become haunted by the Norwegians, and you do it this way rather than that way, because of the Norwegians. And of course this is the very interesting aspect of what you might call the "globalisation of literature." Many things are in turmoil, exciting turmoil perhaps, and sometimes destructive turmoil because of globalisation. And the literary world is perhaps just a very small corner of this process, but I think there is something quite profound happening at the moment.

I think a lot of writers, without ever having a clear policy on it are starting to write differently, because of the Norwegians! And I think, if it is a problem for an English-language writer, it must be much more of an issue for—say—a Norwegian writer who has a sense that in order to have anything like a large significant readership, in order to find his or her place on the literary platform, they will have to be translated primarily into English and French and German. They would have to address their readers through these other, larger languages and this does something quite crucial and profound to what is actually produced. And I think there are good things and bad things. It is good in a way that writers address the whole world and they don't look inward, they perhaps have an outgoing, international viewpoint.

But what is very dangerous of course, is that something very crucial and vital disappears here, in this homogenization of literature: some of the very great energies that come out of someone's knowledge of their own locale, the language that is used in their own culture. All these things will perhaps somehow be ironed out. We will end up with the equivalent of *Newsweek* or *Time Magazine*, although I think they are very good magazines, but you can see that effect . . . a McDonald's kind of effect, even with serious literary fiction. I think this is something that concerns me, I am very aware of that. I am very affected by it, and I think many writers I meet now are very conditioned by these forces.

François Gallix: Indeed, there are dangers. Last week, we had a colloquium at the Sorbonne with British and American authors and in fact this point came up and we discovered that many books written in British English have to be translated into American, with changes also because some of the American readers object to reading about things that are typically British. Now, perhaps your Norwegians would be pleased to know the British and the way they live, the way they talk, even the allusions and puns. So it is a complex debate if

you "iron out," as you put it. But for instance *The Remains of the Day* is a very good example, someone said it was even too British and yet it has such a wide readership and you haven't "ironed it" out.

Kazuo Ishiguro: I have ironed it out. By the time I was writing that book, I was very, very conscious of this. This is the paradox about a book like *The Remains of the Day*. It feels very English (very much in inverted commas: 'English'). It is the Englishness that is understood by an international community. It is probably not the Englishness that is understood by English people who live in England. It is precisely an England that has been conjured up for the consumption of foreigners all around the world. I think this is the paradox of it. And there is nothing in that book that requires you to be intimate with English culture. It assumes that you are not. You don't need to have an inside knowledge of the English culture at all, there are no jokes that only English people would know. You don't have to be familiar with the English theatre or music hall, or acts of that type. It is very much an England that has been ready-made for foreign consumption, ready-made for translation.

François Gallix: And yet butlers wrote to you, believing it was their own story.

Kazuo Ishiguro: Yes, two butlers did write to me. But the trouble with butlers of course is that they are terribly polite and they didn't tell me the truth. Of course I think it is no coincidence that the book was translated into a movie, a Hollywood movie. And they didn't have to change it very much because it was all ready-made for international consumption.

Question: Can you tell us about the movie by James Ivory that was very popular in this country but also all over the world? How does it feel to be somehow the spectator of your own work? Do you think the film really expressed the essence of what you wanted to express in your story? Or that Emma Thompson and Anthony Hopkins's interpretations were really rather strange for you? Do you recognize yourself in their way of playing, interpreting your characters?

Kazuo Ishiguro: Well, I should start by saying that I was very pleased with the movie. Principally because I think it is a very good film. It was a Columbia Pictures movie. They bought the rights, and when that happens you really fear the worst because you've got to actually accept that this is different from an independent arthouse film. So I expected the worst and of

course I didn't know who was going to direct it. They tried various directors: Peter Weir, Sydney Pollack, and ended up with James Ivory. Mike Nichols himself was going to be the director for a long time. He ended up as the producer. And so every time this happened I had a very different image of the kind of film it was going to be. I think the way it turned out, it was very serious, very sincere. I felt that there were very few compromises made to the mass international market that the film had to play to. I was very pleased with the film. I thought that the acting was of a very high standard.

Having said that of course, I think it is different. Of course there are many similarities and in terms of the plot, it is a very faithful rendering of the novel but the atmospheres are very different. My attitude really is that I don't think the film is like another translation. With the French translation or the German translation perhaps, I have a certain right to expect a certain fidelity to my original English text. With a movie I think it is quite different and perhaps sometimes authors make the mistake of thinking a movie is going to be a translation into film. It's not, really. It's a movie that happens to have the same title. And I think the best an author can hope for, is that it's a good movie. And if it's actually close to one's book I think that's a kind of bonus. I think it was a good movie.

Inevitably something happens. You see a movie has to be physically mounted. It can't take place inside a person's head, in the way a book can, and so it becomes much more physical, it becomes much more realistic. In a way, in an odd kind of way, I'll say the film is much more clearly placed in its time and place and history because it has to be. Every time you shoot a scene you have to decide what the room around the actors would look like and so on. How they're dressed. I think it's very much more like a historical re-creation of a particular period.

Whereas my book was intended to be more metaphorical and because you don't physically see the surroundings it's much easier for the metaphorical aspects to take off. Having said that, I know from responses from places like Middle America, that everyone did see the movie very metaphorically, particularly this business about emotional repression. Americans were very big on that and a lot of American women wrote to say they recognised their husbands [laughs] and so I could see how that film fitted very nicely into the kind of Oprah Winfrey kind of concern.

But my literary agent in England actually made a very intelligent remark. She said that, in the movie, the relationship between the two main characters,

Stevens and Miss Kenton, was about emotional repression: they loved each other but they were just too repressed. She said that in the book it's not quite that, it's about self-denial. I think this is quite right, in the relationship between the two in the book, there is a large element of self-denial. It's not just that they're so icy and cold that they can't speak to each other. They actually feel to some extent—certainly Stevens does—that there is some moral reason why he is holding back, why he doesn't allow himself to laugh. He certainly believes that it is self-denial.

So I'll say the film is slightly different but I have to say I think it's a gorgeous and beautiful film. I'm very proud to be associated with it, but really I have to accept that there is this other thing that is called James Ivory's *The Remains of the Day* which is a cousin of my *The Remains of the Day* but it is a different work of art. It's one I have a lot of affection for.

François Gallix: And it is also difficult to visualize your characters because you don't give us much, I mean you let our imagination work. So obviously on the screen we see Anthony Hopkins and Emma Thompson. How did it feel to you, did you visualize your characters but didn't want to help us? For instance, we don't really know what clothes they wear, we don't know what they look like.
Kazuo Ishiguro: I never like to close down the options for visual details in a book because I think they are created most vividly in the reader's mind. So I very rarely describe people physically or even rooms. I just like to pick one or two details and I think often the reader's mind can fit in the details, particularly these days. . . . Perhaps it was different in the last century, but now, the average reader comes to any book with so many images. You say something like: an "ocean liner," immediately lots of images from *Titanic* movies or whatever, crowd into the head. We now have so many visual images that you don't really have to do very much description. You just manipulate these received images in the reader's head. I always prefer to do that.

Now as far as the actors are concerned, well, it was a peculiar experience because people kept proposing different actors. John Cleese was the first candidate to be Stevens. But casting a film is a special problem.

François Gallix: So you had your say in the casting then?
Kazuo Ishiguro: Well, the thing started with Harold Pinter, the British playwright, writing the screenplay, and Mike Nichols who was going to be the

director. Basically how it works is that until the moment the film company actually buys the rights, you have a certain amount of power because you can always say: "I don't like this, I'm going to give it to somebody else." But the moment they actually pay you quite a large amount of money, it becomes their property, they can do whatever they like. You have no say in it at all. My policy is to keep out. If you don't have real power at all then why humiliate yourself? Just keep out!

Question: There are many parallels between *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day*, I wanted to ask you about this "you" which in both cases the narrators address, I mean there are many parallels and many differences but, how come this "you" that is addressed by both narrators remains?
Kazuo Ishiguro: In *An Artist of the Floating World*, as in *The Remains of the Day*, the narrator consciously addresses a "you" when he's telling his story. In this earlier book, part of my subject matter really was how parochial people's moral visions tended to be. And this was about an artist who never really saw beyond his small world: he is stuck in this city. The sadness of his fate has all to do with this. He wants very much to give his heart to big causes, but because he is somebody of very limited vision, he can't really see beyond his own circle, he ends up unquestioningly giving his painting, his talent to propaganda purposes in the 1930s as Japanese militarism builds up, and that's the story.

Now I was very keen that when he is narrating this story, after the war, even then, he can't really imagine his story being heard by anybody other than someone who lives in the town. And so all the way through that book I decided to have him say things like "I'm sure you're familiar with this or that landmark" or "perhaps you're new to this city so you wouldn't know that before the war this was here." That is about as imaginative as he can get about the person he could address, that the possibility the person is new, at some point lived somewhere else.

I wanted to create the effect that the reader was actually not being addressed directly by the narrator but that the reader was actually eavesdropping on this rather enclosed narrator talking to somebody he imagined, the only person he could imagine would listen to him, somebody who lives in his neighbourhood he assumes, that is familiar with the local history.

When I wanted to write about Stevens it is very much the same story on the career-political side: someone who has such a limited world that he

cannot really see the full implications of what he's doing. So Stevens assumes that his "you" is another servant. He cannot really picture a world where somebody might come from outside that world. I found this very useful to my purposes because that's what it is all about. As I said about *The Remains of the Day*, these books I want to be read metaphorically, I want people to get a perspective on the smallness of Stevens's vision and his world and then to say: "Well perhaps my world too is very small, if someone looks at it from some angle" and so it was very important to me to create this atmosphere of smallness and of "parochialness," just the limits of his vision. I found this very effortless and it is a very simple way of doing it.

Question: Professor Shaffer described your characters as "egomaniacs": "guilt-ridden and as trying to pass on, to transfer their shame or their guilt onto others." I was wondering whether in your next novel you intended to pursue that theme?
Kazuo Ishiguro: I have a new book coming out and I think probably the guilt thing is there. . . . I've never really thought about this word very much. I think it's perfectly correct that critics use this word "guilt" in describing the situations in my books but it's not a concept I go into my writing with, very much. I don't think I'm very concerned with, say, something like Kafka's kind of primeval guilt in any kind of way.

I'm much more concerned about a sense of having wasted one's talent, a feeling that you've left yourself down. I've never wanted to write about someone who ran a concentration camp or anything like that. Of course my characters in *The Remains of the Day* or *An Artist of the Floating World* contribute to fascism but at a great distance. It's more that their own lives were tainted by it rather than they did anything guilty in any criminal sense.

I personally don't have a very strong religious sense of guilt either, not having been brought up in any religion that had a strong sense of that. Nevertheless this sense of some nagging feeling that there is some kind of moral mission that one has to fulfil and that one's life would not be satisfactory if one has not fulfilled it, I think that is there all the time in my work and it is there in the book I've just finished. Once again I would not quite call it "guilt" but it is almost entirely about this, almost irrational urge to fulfil some mission even if it seems idiotic and pointless.

This aspect has always fascinated me about people. Perhaps it's because I grew up when I did, when young people tended to be very idealistic, we

gave ourselves large missions to improve humanity, things like this. It wasn't good enough simply to earn a living. When I was growing up, when I was young, we competed with each other in terms of the good political causes we were backing, our positions in the organisations that we worked for, whether they were helping humanity. We were very competitive about these things.

And this has always fascinated me that we can't be like cats or dogs or cows. These other creatures are quite happy to just eat and sleep and reproduce and then die. It's a perfectly good life for them. We are very different, we keep stopping and saying "Is this good enough?" and so on, and we behave in a very strange way, almost a perverse way because we want to fulfil some idea of having done good, although nobody knows what that is. I'm sure cats and cows don't worry about these things, but we do and I think that's always fascinated me, and I think all my characters are people who suffer from this peculiarly human thing. And it's that rather than, I would say, "guilt," which is slightly misleading.

Question: You've spoken of wasted lives and you've quoted your agent saying that the film is about emotional restraint, but the book is about self-denial. So what is really your conception of man? Are you a tenant of determinism or do you believe in a certain dose of free will?
Kazuo Ishiguro: In fact as we lead our lives, we betray to some extent where we fall in that discussion about determinism on the one hand, and free will on the other. And of course if you ask me in a purely intellectual sense what do I believe, I'm not sure I'll be able to answer you particularly since the latest arguments about Darwinism, new Darwinism made things very complicated, but I tend to go on the assumption that yes, we do have quite a large say in how we lead our lives.

Of course we are constricted but if you just confine this discussion to my work, making this question just a little smaller, I would say I believe that people could actually exercise greater control of their lives if only they had the ability to see better the context in which they lived, if they had perspective. Of course we'd still be to some extent enslaved to deterministic forces. The end of the movie of *The Remains of the Day* is rather interesting. There is a huge helicopter shot and it pulls away from the house and for a moment that sense that the whole world of that house suddenly disappears. It's just a small little dot in the landscape and to some extent this is what we all need, a kind of a moral helicopter every now and again so that we can zoom out of our lives and try and see in perspective what we are doing, so that we don't become like

Stevens. This is the tragedy of most of us, it is very difficult to rise above the climate of the time in which we live, to rise above what people around us say should or shouldn't gain prestige. We are very much slaves to that.

It's very difficult to do things if on the one hand you know you're going to be praised for doing something and reviled for doing the other thing. It's very difficult not to do the thing which you're praised for and it's very difficult to see what one actually is doing and I suppose in all these books that's partly what I'm trying to say to myself. It's a kind of warning to myself, most of the time, when I write these stories. They're really little messages, little memos to myself to remind me not to get too complacent and not to get too smart and pleased with myself. Other people at other times have been very pleased and self-satisfied with themselves and very sure that they've been doing very worthwhile things, and just a small little blip in history has suddenly shown them that they were profoundly wrong. Sometimes you don't have a helicopter but sometimes history provides the helicopter and that's all I'm trying to do in these books. Yes, perhaps we have a little more free will if we have a helicopter.

Question: How different do you consider *The Unconsoled* to be from your other books because it's been considered as being quite different? What do you think of the comparison with Kafka? How do you react to your being labelled as "postmodern"?
Kazuo Ishiguro: *The Unconsoled* is probably quite different. My first three novels were really attempts to write the same novel and I say that without any shame. Perhaps I should be guilty about that but it's just the way. . . When I finished one novel I always felt that I hadn't quite tackled certain things the way I wanted to tackle them and so in my first novel there was a kind of a subplot about a character rather like Stevens or Ono in the second novel, and I realised when I wrote my first novel that it was that subplot I was really interested in and not so much the rest of it and so I decided to write a whole novel based on that story.

Basically in these three novels I was interested in answering a very simple question: How do you waste your life? It really came down to that. It was like those American How to . . . books, *How to Waste Your Life* . . .

François Gallix: It wouldn't sell!
Kazuo Ishiguro: And they gave you little tips on how you could waste your life. When I finished *An Artist of the Floating World* I felt I had written a very good

manual about how to waste your life in the sense of your career and your vocation but I hadn't discussed or written very much about the emotional, personal area of one's life. It seemed to me that there are other perfectly great ways to waste your life, even if you had a splendid career that helped the world and the poor, your life was still somehow being impoverished, you just failed to live properly.

If in the personal arena you have failed to love and have proper relationships, and so in *The Remains of the Day* I decided I'd write my second novel all over again except this time with this dimension as well, and I thought perhaps if I changed the setting from Japan to England people wouldn't notice very much the similarity! So really those three books were attempts always to try again, try again.

By the time I finished *The Remains of the Day* I felt I had come to the end of that process and so for *The Unconsoled* I addressed slightly different things and this is natural. One of the difficult things for writers is that you tend to discover a voice at a certain point of your life. People praise you for it, people fix you up as a person who is good at this kind of thing, but of course you change, your life changes, you change as a person as you get older, you change as a writer probably, and I often see writers who are still stuck with the techniques and styles that were appropriate to them twenty, twenty-five years earlier in their lives and there is a difficulty: the voice is not coming through. In other words the techniques have not kept up with the person changing in the world. I felt that I was in danger with this.

When I came to write *The Unconsoled*, I was as much older as the person who started these three novels. My life had changed profoundly and my whole view of life had probably changed. I suppose, it felt slightly unsatisfactory to me, this notion that, as Stevens or as Ono does, you can at a certain late part in your life look back over your life and see a kind of a clear road that you've come down and you can point at this point and this point when you went wrong. Somehow, I'm not saying that's incorrect or not realistic, but that somehow it did not fit anymore my view of how life was, or life might be when I got to that age. I'm not sure that life really can be seen as a kind of clear path where you took a few wrong turns.

In *The Unconsoled* I wanted to express my feeling that it wasn't that controlled, that there was no path. Fate, circumstances, deterministic forces pick you up and just put you down somewhere and then you say: "Oh yes, I'm rather glad I chose to do this job, I'm glad I married this person," and then you make

pronouncements about what you're going to be doing in the future and then this wind picks you up again and puts you somewhere else and you're doing something completely different where the values that you've espoused before have completely changed. You change everything to fit the place where you've been thrown down and you say, "Yes you know I'm working for this company because I believe in globalisation" but actually it's the only job you can get and this is how we tend to go through life, dignifying the position we have landed in. I don't want to make any definitive statement here but at the time when I wrote *The Unconsoled* I was trying to replace that model, which is a rather useful one for writing novels. You can write neat novels by having this model of roads and people taking the wrong paths, but I suspect that if we think about it, our lives are just not like that. It's usually a mess, about a man who's lost his schedule but is too embarrassed to admit it. That became the model for me rather than the road you've lived back on. That's the main difference.

I probably won't have time to talk about Kafka or postmodernism. I still don't know what postmodernism is. I'm actually very badly read, although I know lots of things about jazz music. I've read very little things like Shakespeare. Recently I was actually reading Shakespeare and of course there were all these kinds of sayings and clichés that I'd heard all my life that kept coming up in Shakespeare's plays and of course he seemed to me to be a real postmodernist. I thought how clever that he's taken all these kind of clichés and sayings and woven them into this play and he's made a very strong story out of it! I was listening to a symphony by Beethoven recently and I felt the same thing, all these little tunes that you hear in the elevators and shops and behind advertising! He's taken all these little bits and he's created this wonderful symphony, very clever. I guess that's postmodernism, something like that, I suppose. But I'm never sure if people say I'm a postmodernist. I'm not sure in what sense. Do you think I'm a postmodernist? Honestly I'm not just being funny here, it is a term I have never really known the proper meaning of.

Kazuo Ishiguro

Ron Hogan / 2000

From *Beatrice.com* (2000). Reprinted by permission of Ron Hogan.

Because of the tightness of Kazuo Ishiguro's tour schedule, we were only able to speak briefly with one another over the telephone, but I was still very eager to talk with him about the critical reaction to his fifth novel, *When We Were Orphans.* In it, Christopher Banks, the world's most talented consulting detective, returns to his childhood home of Shanghai during the early stages of the Japanese invasion, convinced that he can avert the coming war if he can just solve the mystery of his parent's disappearance. One of the two *New York Times* reviews, for example, called the novel Ishiguro's "fullest achievement yet," while the other reviewer appeared confused by the novel's stylistic elements, which combine the psychological realism of the novels that marked Ishiguro's rise to literary stardom with the surreality of his previous book, *The Unconsoled.*

RH: As the reviews have started coming in, are you surprised by the polarised responses?

KI: It's not as varied as the reaction to *The Unconsoled*, which some people absolutely hated while others made highest claims for it. To some extent, that controversy continues with this book; I've noticed in a lot of reviews that they'll spend the first half discussing *The Unconsoled*, trying to reassess it.

That second review you mention isn't really negative, either. I mean, she does say she likes parts of the book, though she finds it disappointing overall. But that's not unusual, although it may seem that way because you're in New York and you've got the two main vehicles for book reviews saying different things. But I find increasingly in London that the days of a general consensus about a book or a movie seem to be dying out. In a way, I think that's not a bad thing. It shows that people aren't afraid to say what they think, and

perhaps it reflects a kind of a diversification of literary culture as well. That it's not just a uniform homogenous thing anymore, not a group of elite people secure in their values. There are different sorts of people who all, in some ways, are committed to books, like books, take the whole thing very seriously.

What I'm finding is that there are people who either like the side of my work that is like *The Remains of the Day*—a very well shaped, essentially realistic kind of writing—and then there are those who prefer me actually to be doing, I don't necessarily think better, but slightly riskier things such as *The Unconsoled* and parts of this book. So I would say a lot of the initial critical response, even the favorable reviews, has had an element of qualification about it, as opposed to the kind of fairly universal praise I got for *The Remains of the Day*. But qualification goes both ways: There are people who say, "Isn't it a shame that he pulls back at the end and ties up all the ends in a traditional narrative? He doesn't need to do that." Just as there are people who say, "What a shame he spoils what might have been a really nice sort of realistic, post-Jamesian, kind of Edwardian story with this weird stuff in the second half."

RH: As in many of your books, an unreliable narrator looks back at his memories and gradually starts to realize things that he or she missed before. But in earlier books, the narration was much more naturalistic; here, chinks in the narrator's armor start appearing quite early for people who are savvy enough to catch them.

KI: I think with a character like Stevens, or any of my earlier first-person narrators, it's very easy for the reader to measure the distance between his version of reality, what he's telling himself happened, and what actually happened out there. You can actually measure how unreliable he is; there's a clear sense in which the writer and the reader collude over the head of the narrator, to some extent. So there are things we don't know about in *The Remains of the Day*, but that's only because we haven't been told them.

Christopher Banks is unreliable in a different way. It's not an attempt to do that kind of unreliable narrator where we can see that he's slightly crazy, or getting crazier and crazier as the book goes on, but we always have a clear sense of what the normal world is and how far he's moved away from it. What I was trying to do is to paint a picture of what the world might look like if it ran according to the less rational emotional logic that we often carry within us. We all kind of know what that means, metaphorically, to say that

somebody is trying to replay something that went wrong in the past and do it right this time. We know that, in most cases, we're not talking literally here. But in this book, to some extent, there's an attempt to portray a world that bends to that emotional logic, so in the latter half of the book, when Christopher Banks goes around declaring that his parents must be holed up somewhere, even after all these years, and he must free them, and that this is the most important crucial thing in stopping the war, people don't do a double take. Because he still lives in the childhood vision of the world that's frozen since the time that he lost his parents when he was a little boy; it's remained arrested at that point and now it's applied to the adult world that he encounters.

RH: So he really is a famous consulting detective?
KI: Yes. As I say, it's not a picture of a fantasist or a mad person going through a normal, realistic world. It's actually the whole portrait of the world as it would be, if it ran according to a less rational logic that, nevertheless, I think, has enormous influence in the way we go about our lives. We don't always do things for sensible reasons. We don't choose our careers, or our friends, or our partners in life according to clean, logical reasons. This element of trying to replay things from the past—motives like that are often very powerful and I think that unconscious side of us, that "mad logic" part of us, is a very important part of our lives.

RH: In allowing Christopher to grow up and become the celebrated detective he's dreamed of being since a child, was it fun for you to—I don't want to say parody, but let's say tweak the conventions of that type of fictional English detective?
KI: Yes, it was fun just at the basic level of a reader wanting to be entertained. I do enjoy those detective mysteries. Now, over the distance of time, there is a certain kind of quaintness that comes from that style and the atmosphere of that past age. But in a way, it was my way of trying to seduce a reader, you know, evoking a certain kind of atmosphere, an old world, Edwardian atmosphere. But I did have other reasons for choosing that kind of cozy detective story as a thing to parody or pastiche. I was quite keen to look at that view of how you deal with evil. In those detective mysteries of that time, there was a certain view of what evil is and how you deal with it to expunge it. Those mystery novels written by people like Agatha Christie, Ngaio Marsh, or

Dorothy L. Sayers often give you an idealized harmonious community, usually an English village, that would be absolutely tranquil if only this one thing hadn't gone wrong . . . which is that somebody's been murdered. The evil is always very clear and easy to identify; you just don't know who the bad person *is*, and that's the mystery. So the detective unmasks this one element and everything goes back to being beautiful again.

What struck me about that whole genre is how it flourished immediately after the First World War. In other words, it was a very poignant escapism on the part of a generation that knew full well that evil and suffering in the modern world wasn't about a master criminal or a clever vicar who was poisoning people for somebody's inheritance. They had had the trauma of experiencing modern technological warfare in a world where nationalism and racism had gone bananas. They had seen a vision of the world that their leaders couldn't control, where bloodshed and suffering seemed to be unlimited in potential, and they very much wanted to escape it. I mean, they knew full well that the world wasn't like those novels, evil wasn't like that. But they wanted for a time to escape into that vision of how simple life could be if all you had to do was point to the person who was committing evil and the problem would go away. So part of my reason for being attracted to the whole detective thing was to say, "Well, let's look at someone who believes that everything that's gone bad in the world, in his personal world as well as the larger world, comes from an evil criminal element that needs to be unmasked. Let's bring him into the chaos of the twentieth century and the brink of another world war. Let's see how he copes. Let's see how long he can hang on to his little vision of how to deal with the problems of life."

RH: As you've veered away from the realistic narration of your earlier fiction, do you see yourself continuing to explore the subconscious and the fantastic or might you head back to the types of narrators that you've done before?
KI: I don't see myself being dogmatic about it. I don't have any kind of beliefs about the right way to write. I don't entertain any notion, as some people do, that there is something outmoded about realism or naturalism, or that there's no point in doing it because cinema does it better. I feel I've simply expanded the territory that I feel happy dealing with. I feel I can still do a straight kind of a narrative, like *The Remains of the Day*, if I want to. In fact, my first novel, *A Pale View of Hills*, is actually much more towards the other

sort of story. A lot of people forget how it veers away a bit into something strange, but I think that side of my writing was always there to some extent.

So it very much depends on what I'm trying to do in a particular book. I don't think I'm going to stick with one thing or the other. I've got three possible projects lined up. I haven't quite decided which one of those I would actually work on as a novel. One of them would demand a much more traditional mode; there's no point in being strange and bizarre for no other reason than to be strange and bizarre. There has to be an artistic reason for it. I don't believe in baffling people and annoying people just for the sake of it, for the sake of being clever. But if you're trying to do something, sometimes that's the only way in which you can do it, and there are a couple of other things that would require a slight stepping away from realism.

An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro

Brian W. Shaffer / 2001

From *Contemporary Literature*, vol. XLII, no. 1 (Spring 2001). Reprinted by permission of University of Wisconsin Press and Brian W. Shaffer.

I interviewed Kazuo Ishiguro over high tea in London on July 21, 2000, in the Palm Court of the Waldorf Astoria Hotel. The Palm Court is a room in which Ishiguro set a scene in his fifth and latest novel, *When We Were Orphans*. A harpist provided background music in this traditional English tearoom that day, lending a slightly uncanny air to our conversation—an air that would not be out of place in Ishiguro's new novel. The Booker Prize–winning author of *The Remains of the Day* came across as down-to-earth and unassuming, at once humorous and serious, relaxed and penetratingly intense. While the author was candid and straightforward that afternoon, his fictional protagonists, despite their apparent eagerness to divulge their thoughts, work hard to conceal the alarming significances and troubling consequences of their past lives. Indeed, all of these first-person narrators—Etsuko in *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), Ono in *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), Stevens in *The Remains of the Day* (1988), Ryder in *The Unconsoled* (1995), and Christopher Banks in *When We Were Orphans* (2000)—tell stories that characteristically mask or distort rather than uncover the true essence of their tales.

Ishiguro's five novels to date are intricately crafted, psychologically absorbing, hauntingly evocative works that betray the author's grounding not only in the realist European novelistic tradition (Ishiguro speaks often of his debt to Charlotte Brontë, Dickens, Chekhov, and Dostoyevsky) but in the discourse of modern psychology (before beginning to write fiction, Ishiguro was a social worker with the homeless in various Glasgow and London

I would like to thank Rhodes College for its generous support of this interview and Elizabeth Keith for her invaluable editorial and typing assistance. Thanks are also due to Jennifer Brady and Jo Ellyn Clarey for their editorial input.

shelters). In all of these novels—whether the protagonist is a bereaved mother, an aging artist, a professional butler, a world-famous pianist, or, as in the most recent example, a "celebrated detective"—the narrative moves back and forth seamlessly across events spanning several decades of the protagonist's life to form a vast web of personal and historical traumas. Whether these events take place in postwar Nagasaki, in an interwar England flirting with rising fascism, or in the war-torn, besieged Shanghai of the 1930s, it is always the central character's quietly anguished interior landscape upon which the most compelling drama is being enacted.

Ishiguro was born in Nagasaki, Japan, in 1954 and was raised and educated in England, his family having moved to Guildford, Surrey, after his father, an oceanographer, was hired to work on a North Sea oil project. Kazuo studied English and philosophy as an undergraduate at the University of Kent, graduating in 1978, and then creative writing as a postgraduate with novelist-critic Malcolm Bradbury at the University of East Anglia, graduating in 1980. Ishiguro is now one of Britain's most celebrated contemporary novelists, and the author's acclaim extends far beyond the world of Anglophone readers. His works have been translated into twenty-eight foreign languages, and *The Remains of the Day*, in addition to being awarded the Booker Prize, was produced as a feature film by Merchant-Ivory Productions, in an adaptation by novelist Ruth Prawer Jhabvala. The 1993 film was nominated for eight Academy Awards, assuring the author an even wider global following. At present Ishiguro divides his time between novel writing and original screenplay work.

Q. *When We Were Orphans* is a poignant psychological thriller in the guise of a detective drama—something that we haven't previously seen from you. Yet at a number of points your new novel bears at least a superficial resemblance to *The Unconsoled*, particularly in its dreamlike, absurdist feel. Do you view *Orphans* as representing a new direction for your work, a refinement of the concerns and techniques of *The Unconsoled*, or a return to the structural and narrative tautness of your first three novels?
A. To some extent, all three of those things you said have some truth in them. It's only in hindsight, though, that I think about my new book's relation to its predecessors. Obviously, when you're writing a book, you just try and make the book work and it just comes out in a certain way. But looking back on it, certainly I was aware that I was going over some of the themes I had tried to

tackle in *The Unconsoled:* the ways in which we creatively misremember childhood; the ways in which we try to repair something from the past when it's actually far too late—a kind of absurd, unrealistic ambition to try and put back something that fragmented a long time ago. But *The Unconsoled* takes place in a kind of dreamlike world in which the narrator's past, present, and future merge to some extent. In my new novel, the story is told in the context of a superficially realistic thriller. We have a literal plot here; we are dealing with things that actually happened to Christopher Banks, the protagonist. As a child, his parents were kidnapped. As an adult, he thinks that if he can only solve this mystery, from years ago, he'll save not just his own world and set the clock back to a happier time; he'll be able to save the whole world.

Q. It sounds as if, on the front end, you worried a lot about your new novel's relative degree of realism.
A. Definitely. Although many dimensions of the novel sort of worked themselves out as I went along, I had to make a decision before I even started work on the novel as to what extent the setting would be that strange, unrealistic world and to what extent it would be closer to realism. In other words, I had to decide where to position it on that spectrum between a weird world and a recognizably realistic, everyday world. This is something that I was forced to think about consciously to some extent because these issues had been raised by *The Unconsoled*, not just by me but by its readers. I decided to start the new novel off relatively close to reality, but not too close, of course, as we're still quite a bit away from reality since we're talking about the world of detectives—a world in which detectives are celebrated in a fairly everyday manner and people talk about becoming detectives as if it were some kind of normal career move. My idea was that this novel, rather than remaining static in this respect, would move slightly from occupying one kind of world to occupying another kind of world—that we would slide toward the stranger world rather than go bang into it, as in *The Unconsoled*. You might say that Banks narrates at different points in his life, and that each time he narrates, his consciousness has slid further, deeper into his head or something. So that eventually the world he portrays becomes a sort of internal world.

Q. I see what you mean: *When We Were Orphans* begins realistically but then becomes more internal as it goes along. Yet toward the novel's close, quite abruptly, it becomes rather more realistic or "external" again.

A. Yes, you could say that the narrator gets stranger and stranger and then recovers. If you wanted a kind of realistic explanation as to why the narrative viewpoint alters like this, you could say that basically Banks starts off relatively sane, then starts to go pretty insane. I suppose that it's necessary to have these justifications for why the narrator is so unreliable.

Q. One other point of continuity between *Orphans* and your earlier work is that Christopher Banks, like Ono, Stevens, and Ryder, appears to confuse his public and private responsibilities. All of your first-person protagonists willingly neglect their personal responsibilities for the good of "civilization" as they construe it. This would appear to be a recurring motif in your work.
A. Yes, but I think there's a slight difference between Christopher Banks's idea of saving the world and, say, Ono's, in *An Artist of the Floating World*. By the time we come to Christopher Banks, it's a pretty unrealistic idea of saving the world and more an extension of his feeling that the whole world once collapsed for him, that his personal world collapsed when he was a child. A child's logic somehow dictates that when you heal your own past, the whole world will come to be put back together again. So in his head, on some sort of metaphorical level, he's describing a situation in which the whole world literally is falling apart—in this case, falling apart into a world war. My earlier narrators, on the other hand, exist in a more realistic world and try to make fairly realistic assessments about how they can contribute to civilization, humanity, or whatever. By the time we get to somebody like Stevens, the butler, it's a little grandiose—his assumption that by helping great men, by butlering, by polishing the silver of an aristocrat, he is contributing to humanity. It's slightly absurd and sad, but nevertheless there is still a shred of sound logic there. And I think that's what most of us do to dignify what we do in life. While there is continuity, then, I see Christopher Banks's relationship to civilization, to society, to the world, as different. I think there is no logical or rational relationship here between his wanting to solve the mystery about his parents and his wanting to avert the Second World War. That's a gap that simply cannot be filled with any kind of reason or logic; it's a purely emotional response.

Q. Yet isn't this reminiscent of Ryder's belief that he can save the town through his much anticipated "performance"?
A. Yes, that is there. There's obviously a clear parallel between Christopher Banks's saving the world and Ryder's saving the town. But I think they are

distinct, even if both are in some way related to the more idealistic and morally ambitious narrators of the earlier books.

Q. One radical break with your earlier fiction in *Orphans* is the way in which you handle the novel's denouement. For the first time in your work, the reader is presented with what actually happened and why, with the facts of the case. Ironically, then, although the protagonist is a detective this time, the reader is required to be *less* of a detective than previously, as we're apprised of "who done it" in very clear terms by the novel's end. Does the reader perhaps have somewhat less interpretive work to do here compared with your earlier novels, in which the facts never quite come into focus?
A. I'm not so sure. Yes, we do get some facts. For example, we know what happened to Banks's mother, where his inheritance came from, that sort of thing. I thought it quite important to supply this level of plot, including a clear resolution and a concrete explanation of that part of the story, having set *Orphans* up as a pseudo-detective novel. I think the bits that are more mysterious, the bits where the reader perhaps has more work to do, concern questions about Christopher himself. Was he really a detective? Was he just a fantasist? Was he really in Shanghai? Why was there this apparent connection between his solving his personal case and his saving the world? Why is it not just him but other people he meets who share this assumption? Why would his parents still be sort of frozen in time by these kidnappers? These kinds of questions, it seems to me, remain open and difficult; these are the questions that for me lead to the really interesting areas. In the main, it's an internal world, it's an emotional logic that is being played out here. It is therefore those types of emotional issues—and not the facts—that most interest and concern me.

Q. I view your work as, at bottom, psychological in orientation; and *Orphans*, among other things, strikes me as a deeply provocative meditation on the power of nostalgia. I recently read a book on James Joyce and memory in which the author, John S. Rickard, reminds us that the word "nostalgia" is drawn from the Greek words *nostos*, or "return," and *algos*, or "pain." Rickard goes on to describe nostalgia as "an obsessive return that cherishes the pain of absence" and as "an orientation toward the past that freezes past existence, preventing rather than encouraging true investigation and dialectic." He defines the nostalgist as one who "turns toward the past in order to avoid the present and future." This all

strikes me as somehow terribly relevant to Banks's situation, as the entire novel hinges on his literal and figurative return to the Shanghai of his youth.
A. Yes, but you see, while nostalgia is quite an important concept for me in this book and in my other books, that definition of nostalgia, like most definitions of nostalgia, is a largely pejorative one. It implies that possessing it impedes people from doing things properly.

Q. That it's a form of escapism?
A. Yes, that it's escapism of a bad sort; that it's an evasion of something. To an extent, I'll go along with that; but I've always tried to defend nostalgia as an emotion, because I think it can be quite a valuable force in our lives. I do understand why people are against nostalgia, particularly in places like Britain and France, because nostalgia is seen here as a bad political force to the extent that it's applied to a nation's memory. It's seen as something that skirts around the darker side of Empire—the glories and comforts and luxuries of Empire—without actually taking into account all of the true costs and true evils of empire. Peddling nostalgia is seen as something that promotes our forgetting the suffering and exploitation of colonial times. And so nostalgia is often seen as a bit of a dirty word here. And I would go along with that to a large extent; I accept why nostalgia has a bad name in general, at least on the political and historical level. But the pure emotion of nostalgia is actually quite a valuable thing that we all feel at times. And in my books, particularly the more recent ones, I feel that the kind of nostalgia I'm trying to get at could actually be a positive thing in that it's a kind of emotional equivalent to idealism. It's a remembering of a time in your childhood before you realized that the world was as dark as it was. It's kind of Eden-like memory of a time when you were in that childhood "bubble," when adults and parents led you to believe that the world was a better, a nicer place. And then, of course, at some stage you come out of that bubble, and, if you're fortunate, you come out of it gradually, with guidance. If you're unfortunate, like Christopher, one day you're just thrown out of it. And of course then you grow up with a sense of disappointment—perhaps a profound disappointment—that the world isn't quite as nice as you once thought it was going to be.

But all of us, even when we come out of that bubble, carry with us some residue of that earlier time. And that often expresses itself in a sense of nostalgia about our childhood. We're remembering, yes, more naive, more innocent days; but perhaps at the same time nostalgia is a way of imagining the

possibility of a world that is actually purer, one less flawed than the one we know we must inhabit. This is why I say that nostalgia is the emotional equivalent or intellectual cousin of idealism. It's something that anchors us emotionally to a sense that things should and can be repaired. We can feel our way towards a better world because we've had an experience of it; we carry some sort of distant memory of that world somewhere even though it is a flawed memory, a flawed vision. We feel maybe that we *can* return to that world. Of course, the result can be very positive—people pursuing a very positive vocation or some kind of idealism. It can also of course lead to some very evasive action too. But that whole area I find quite fascinating.

Q. That's quite a compelling defense of nostalgia. You're right that it tends to get bad press and that it needn't always involve some kind of pathological evasion.
A. We must campaign . . .

Q. Your point about nostalgia and the childhood bubble our parents construct and then lead us out of reminds me of a line in E. M. Forster's first novel, *Where Angels Fear to Tread:* "All a child's life depends on the ideal it has of its parents." I was wondering if you think this to be a fair summation of Banks's situation in *Orphans.* Or, for that matter, of Ryder's in *The Unconsoled,* or Stevens's in *The Remains of the Day?*
A. Yes, it probably is. Still, that's quite an extreme statement because it suggests that parents are everything. But it's certainly the case that I've represented my characters as people who, to some extent, have built their sense of the ideal upon a parent or parent figure. And I suppose that only later on do they discover that the parent figure or figures weren't quite as they saw them: Stevens and his father, or Banks (in a much more literal, less subtle way) and his parents. I guess Banks builds his parents up in his mind; he gives himself a version of events that makes them very dignified and heroic. But to some extent, maybe it's all right for us to have an exaggeratedly heroic view of our parent figures if it helps us in life—rather than going around thinking that the people we emotionally admire or emulate are shabby figures. Maybe it's better to err on that side—to err on the side of thinking that they're grander and more heroic than they really are. But I think the downside of that—and I think this is what to some extent my books are about—the downside of having parents whom my protagonists idealize is that this exerts enormous

pressure on them. And sometimes it means that they've contorted and distorted their lives in an attempt to live up to some standard that in reality their parents never lived up to and that nobody could live up to. That's certainly the case with Stevens and Ryder. They're casualties of this parental idealization. They're not allowed to get on with their own lives because they've got somehow to live up to these very high, self-projected standards.

Q. Many of your protagonists actually strike me less as failing to live up to their parents' high standards than as emotionally neglected by their parents. I'm thinking here of Stevens and Ryder. Maybe they're projecting this pressure as coming from their parents because they wish their parents would have engaged them in some way or cared enough to hold them to a high mark, when in fact they weren't there for them emotionally. A related psychological issue that your new novel grapples with so intriguingly—and it reminds me of Dickens's treatment of the same issue in *Great Expectations*—is the orphan condition. Banks himself, Sarah Hemmings, and Jennifer, Banks's ward, all are orphans and must "face the world as orphans," as Banks puts it at one point. I'm wondering where this concern comes from. Why do all of these orphans feel so guilty? And why do they feel the need to "rescue" their parents, spouses, friends, and even the world?
A. This is actually part of the same question we discussed earlier. For me, "orphans" is just a metaphor for that condition of coming out of that bubble in an unprotected way. Most of us are not orphans, and we have our hand held as we come out of the illusionary world that adults have created for us as we grow up. In this way we're gradually made to cope with the more difficult things in life. Some people aren't guided in this way; this is a condition, metaphorically, that we might call the orphan condition. You leave that protected world and then you suddenly find yourself alone in this harsher world. So in my new novel, I've taken characters who are literally orphans to exaggerate that point. Banks, Sarah, and Jennifer all feel that they have to repair something and only then that they can pick up where they left off. At some level Banks thinks that his parents are frozen in time in some kidnapper's house and that, if he finds them, his life will carry on just as it was before his parents disappeared; that he can pick up where he left off just by going to the old house. Somehow, he feels, things would be more or less how they would have been had things continued on uninterrupted, had the real world not intruded.

Q. That's when I knew we weren't in a realistic world anymore. It really struck me when Banks imagined that he could find his parents in the house exactly where they left off decades earlier. This is the first point where we very definitely begin to see that the novel has diverged from its concrete grounding.
A. Yes, the book moves from one kind of realism to another kind of realism. I remember now when I was devising the novel that this shift was partly prompted by my feeling that people are quite strong emotionally when they're young. When I was a young man myself I always imagined that you got stronger and stronger, emotionally speaking, as you aged. You got more and more stable; you worked out all these things in your life more and more successfully. So you would suffer less and less from anything that life handed you early as you learned to assimilate and cope with these hardships. That's certainly how the adult world looked to me then. But as I've gotten older myself, I've noticed that's not the case. Around me, people I imagined were coping with their lives perfectly well in their twenties seemed to crash on some rocks. If you looked carefully, you could see that these problems were there right from the start. When you're young, there's the sense that your life can change, that you can become something else later on if you wish. This seeming open-endedness keeps people going for a certain time; but problems seem to catch up with them at that point when they realize their lives aren't going to change that much anymore. Life doesn't present an infinite series of twists and turns now. You've been dealt a certain hand and that's it. People's lives fall apart; they get depressed. I've seen quite a lot of this happen to people in their late thirties or so. Although until now they've been able to keep going on certain hopes and plans, suddenly all this baggage from the past comes in and overwhelms them. So it felt right to me that the earlier part of Banks's life should be relatively straightforward but that when he's narrating in his late thirties things should get pretty weird.

Q. When I teach your novels in my college classes, students tend to be torn over where you leave your protagonists at the end. Some see hope and resolution for Ono and Stevens, for example, while others see tragic and self-delusory failure. What's your take on Banks at the close of *Orphans*? Has his life been a noble failure, a qualified success, merely average? Are we to view his rheumatism as an emblem of emotional paralysis? Or should we resist thinking in these terms altogether?

A. Well, I can see that that question is relevant to people like Ono and Stevens, because their books pose the questions, Is it possible to contribute to the good of the world? How difficult or easy is it to make a contribution to a more civilized world? They do pose these questions, so it is justified for people to argue over whether these novels close on a hopeful note or not, particularly as Ono and Stevens discover that, despite their best efforts, they've actually not succeeded. You're asking about Banks here, but I'd like to say a bit more about Ono and Stevens in order to answer your question. I wanted *An Artist of the Floating World* to end on a note of Ono thinking, "My life's messed up because I happened along at a certain time in Japanese history." I wanted a certain poignancy to emerge from his sense that a man's life is only so long, while the life of a nation is much longer; that Japan as a nation could actually learn from its mistakes and try again even if Ono couldn't. Ono is looking at this younger generation of people coming up. Perhaps they have the same sense of patriotism or idealism that he had, but they live in different times and they may well have a better chance of creating something worthwhile. Ono has got to accept that a man's life is much too short to have a second chance. He had a go; it's too late for him to have another. But he takes comfort in the fact that a nation's life isn't like a man's life. A new generation comes along; Japan can try again. So there's mixed hope—I intended that anyway—at the end of that book.

Stevens, at his novel's close, is perhaps deluding himself in thinking that he still has time to lead his life in a different way or become a new person. We sense that he's going to be hopeless at bantering or joking or whatever. He's never going to be one of the lads; we can see that he's far too set in his ways. But I wanted to suggest somehow that even the fact that he finally comes to see himself clearly is an achievement and a sort of dignity in itself. There is something noble—even heroic—in his ability to face up to those very painful things about himself. There is something positive about Stevens's triumph over that impasse, even though there is still something sad about him.

To some extent, I think the matter of the relative hopefulness of the ending is a less relevant question for my later books. As far as I'm concerned, people like Banks didn't have much of a choice. They've been handed this broken thing at a certain point in their lives. They really couldn't get on with their lives because they were holding this thing and they had to fix it. At the end of *When We Were Orphans*, Banks hasn't fixed it, but at least he's kind of gotten rid of it. He's come to some resolution. The whole agenda of his life is

no longer dictated by trying to sort this thing out, at least. Christopher Banks doesn't really delude himself. There's talk maybe he'll get married, but he knows that's nonsense. He knows he's a certain way. He tries to tell himself he was dealt a certain hand by life—he was dealt an orphan's hand—and that it must be played through to the end. At one point Sarah Hemmings tells him: "Let's forget about all this baggage. Let's try and get on with life—try and love and be loved instead of always trying to fix something from the past." He probably doesn't know for sure whether he should have taken her advice or not, but in the end he feels he didn't really have a choice. I guess that's fairly close to my instinct: that it's not really a case of whether these people are acting correctly or incorrectly—that's almost irrelevant—or whether their lives end on a hopeful note or not. These characters are given a compulsive task by circumstances, by life. Whatever they may wish, they have to see this task through to the end, until it's resolved in some way.

Q. Would you care to tell us anything about your current fiction writing or film work?

A. I think we're very close to clinching a film deal for *When We Were Orphans*. It could be quite exciting. But as with all such things, you never quite know how it's going to end up. *Orphans* has attracted a different kind of film interest than, say, *The Remains of the Day*. And you've got to be a little bit careful in that. You've got to make sure that the people making the film appreciate all the different dimensions of the work—that they're not just out to make a Shanghai thriller. Sometimes people in movies do think in those terms: "Oh, yes, it would be quite good to do something in Shanghai at that time with kidnappings and detectives—yes, let's go for it. We don't understand this bit in the book. We'll throw it out. The screenwriter will do something." It might still be a terrific film, but you've got to be slightly more careful because of the more obviously commercial aspects of the book, if you like.

Otherwise, I'll offer my usual complaint or moan that you finish a book these days and then must spend anything up to two years promoting it, as the book comes out in different parts of the world. It's actually very difficult to start work on a new project under these circumstances. When I can, I have three possible projects in mind, though I haven't quite decided which one I'll pursue.

One of these ideas occurred to me when I was at a conference in Italy. I heard a paper by an Italian critic who argued that in the earlier part of the

twentieth century, the Freudian way of looking at the world—seeing human beings as repressing sexual and other urges, as being emotionally repressed—was relevant and dominant. For good reason a lot of people in the field of counseling found the Freudian model very useful. This Italian critic argued that, increasingly, he and his colleagues were coming across people who seemed to be suffering from the opposite, suggesting that perhaps the world has changed profoundly since Freud's days, and particularly in the last several years. We've been bombarded by media, advertising, whatever, into believing we should have all of these different urges that perhaps we don't actually have. We're haunted by the thought, "Our life isn't good enough. We should really be leading that sort of life. We should be going on a plane like that, to a place like that, with a person like that," or whatever. "Oh no, we should have a house like this, not like the one we've got." We feel there's something wrong. This critic believes that much of the confusion people are in—the pain they feel—comes not from repression but in a sense from its reverse. With so many things pulling people in so many different directions, far from being repressed, people are having latent or perhaps even nonexistent urges created for them, so that they start to become very unsure about who they are or what their role should be. It becomes difficult settling into one role in life. You said earlier, when I asked you how you were getting on with teaching, "fine," that that's what you were born to do. That's a refreshingly stable statement. A lot of people might have said, "Well, that's what I'm doing at the moment, but I've also got this screenplay, and I've also been playing the stock market, and, if it goes right, I'm going to leave my family and take up with this beautiful woman I ran into in Singapore last year." To some extent, it's American values spreading round the world. And this can be a very positive thing in that you don't restrict yourself, you strive to fulfill your potential. I guess what I'm saying is that, on the other hand, there can be casualties of that kind of world-view. You put a lot of demands on yourself for that reason, because the flip side of saying, "Yes, you can achieve anything" is, "I haven't achieved very much; it must be my fault."

I've been thinking about what implications this world-view might have for my writing if I were to incorporate it into one of my books. I feel that my tone and my narrators so far have been associated with emotional repression—not just their characters but the very way they speak, the way I write, the techniques I employ. To some extent that's because my work has come out of a tradition of writing from an older generation of authors, from

Charlotte Brontë through, say, the American writers of the early part of the last century, Hemingway and so on, all of whom have done that kind of thing. But I'm wondering if it's time to try to construct a voice, a way of writing, that somehow takes on board some of the post-Freudian tensions of life—that comes not from buckling up, not from being unable to express yourself, but from just being pulled left, right, and center by possible role models and urges, by a sense that you're missing out. That would involve a different kind of voice, would imply a different way of writing, and would lead to a very different-looking novel.

Like Idealism Is to the Intellect: An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro

Cynthia F. Wong / 2001

From *Clio*, vol. 30, no. 3 (2001). Reprinted by permission of *Clio* and Cynthia F. Wong.

Novelist Kazuo Ishiguro was five years old when, in 1960, his family moved from Nagasaki to Great Britain. He was educated at the University of Kent at Canterbury and the University of East Anglia. The following interview took place on September 20, 2000, at the Le Meridien Waldorf Hotel in London, in the midst of Ishiguro's global tour to promote his fifth novel. *When We Were Orphans* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000) tells the tale of a celebrated London detective who returns to Shanghai's International Settlement to solve a mystery which has eluded him since he was ten years old: the disappearance of his parents.

All of Ishiguro's novels have been critically acclaimed. His four previous books are *A Pale View of Hills* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), winner of the Winifred Holtby Prize of the Royal Society of Literature; *An Artist of the Floating World* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), winner of the Whitbread Book of the Year Award; *The Remains of the Day* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), winner of Britain's prestigious Booker Prize; and *The Unconsoled* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), winner of the Cheltenham Prize. In October 2000, *When We Were Orphans* was "short-listed" for the Booker Prize.

Ishiguro's first two novels are set in Japan, the third in England, the fourth somewhere in an unidentified European country, and the most recent in London and Shanghai. Critics have explored the settings and their corresponding historical contexts for their symbolic or metaphorical significance and to discern their author's philosophical perspectives. Ishiguro himself has preferred to see his works as offering an international or universal view of human experiences, a goal he identifies when explaining his vision or purpose as a writer.

Cynthia Wong: In 1989, you told Kenzaburo Oe, "I didn't really care if my fictional world didn't correspond to a historical reality. I very much feel that as a writer of fiction that is what I'm supposed to do—I'm supposed to invent my own world, rather than copying things down from the surface of reality."[1]

What is your present view of corresponding historical reality to fictional creation, particularly with references to Shanghai and Japan in your novels, for instance?

Kazuo Ishiguro: I'm not suggesting that a novelist has no responsibility at all to what might be a consensus among historians about what happened or how things were at a particular time and place. What I'm trying to stress is that a novelist's priorities aren't at all to those things; I'm suggesting that a reader shouldn't read novelists primarily to understand factual things about history. I use history; I mean, I hope I don't abuse history, but once or twice I might even do that.

CW: What are the main differences between the work of a novelist and that of an historian?

KI: Historians have to go about things in a certain disciplined way; they have to present evidence, they have to argue for their particular view of what happened in an academically disciplined environment. I'm under no such obligation; I can read history as a kind of location for my stories. Often, I feel that is what I'm doing. I look at a certain time in history, because I think it would help to bring out certain themes.

In the end, I want people to read my books not because they might learn something about the period in which these things happened, but because I might be able to share some more abstract vision of life and the world with them.

CW: What is the novelist's responsibility to such a vision of life?

KI: I do think there is a certain responsibility that novelists have to exercise. Every few years there's some kind of Holocaust memoir that people object to [because] they think it is a dangerous lie. Well, recently, there was a very interesting case, the Wilkomirski affair, which was the other way around. His

1. Kenzaburo Oe and Kazuo Ishiguro, "The Novelist in Today's World: A Conversation," *Boundary* 2 (1991): 110–11.

book was published in 1995 and it won many, many prizes; it was supposed to be a non-fictional account of a small child growing up in Auschwitz—it's called *Fragments*—and almost instantly, it became or seemed to be a milestone in Holocaust writing. Only, actually, it was then exposed that the author had made it up.[2]

But, what was interesting was that he wasn't Jewish; he was Swiss. Had he said it was a novel, none of this would have occurred. And, what seemed to have happened was that he was trying to express some inner sense of anguish about his personal life. He had been orphaned, and he came from this rather untouchable class of Swiss society at the time; he was taken up by these people, who according to him, didn't treat him that well. He thought that the Holocaust—growing up in Auschwitz—was some sort of appropriate expression [or] metaphor for his view of life.

This case raises a lot of these issues about the difference between fiction and non-fiction. Had he said from the start that he was a Swiss guy and had never been in Auschwitz, that he was writing this as a novel and that he feels some point of identification with Holocaust victims because of his own personal circumstances that had nothing to do with the Holocaust, that would be absolutely acceptable.

But when he says that he was actually there and it's supposed to be a historical account, of course the line is crossed. But, the book remains the same that was published in 1995; but now, it's no longer valued. It's become a notorious book. Now the book's an embarrassment around the world. This is an extreme example of the two categories [of history and fiction] being blurred.

I think there are different things—the kind of truth you'd get from a novelist is quite different from the kind of truth an historian purports to present.

CW: What do you find is the "truth" in writing novels?
KI: I don't think it's anything as specific as factual truth of the sort that historians might be after, or indeed that people are after in a court of law when

2. Binjamin Wilkomirski's book, *Fragments*, was published in the original German in 1995 before being translated into English and published by Random House in 1996. It was eventually translated into eleven other languages, made into two documentary films, and promoted by the author in numerous public appearances. In the United States, it won the 1996 National Jewish Book Award for Autobiography and Memoir; in Britain, it was awarded the Jewish Quarterly Literary Prize; and in France, it won the *Prix Memoire de la Shoah*. The book is currently out of print.

they're trying to figure out what happened when evidence is presented. It's truth used in a slightly blurrier sense; it's just one person saying, "Here's a certain way of looking at human emotional experience. Doesn't this accord with your view of human experience?"

It's appealing to other people's sense of the truth: "Doesn't it look this way to you, too? Doesn't it feel this way to you, too?"

And, I suppose if you're trying to say something slightly different or slightly new, then what you're saying is, "Perhaps you've never looked at it this way, but now that I've put things this way, don't you recognize this, too?" It's an appeal to truth in that sense; it's not bringing evidence to the table saying, "Here are all these bits of evidence, so this must inescapably adapt to this conclusion." It's not that kind of scientific truth or even social scientific truth. As far as I'm concerned, it's more an appeal for companionship in experiencing life.

CW: In the same conversation with Oe, you discussed writers' responsibility to developing their craft; you say that they have to move "with the way that history is moving."[3] Your main point was to say that writers should not be simply peripheral or narrowly focused. How do you see the history of literature in Britain "moving"?
KI: I think what I was suggesting there—because I was in Japan—I was comparing the situation of Japanese authors to those in Britain. I was suggesting then that the "way history is moving"—that Japan as a culture was moving into a more dominant position, whereas Britain once had a dominant position in Empire days in the world. It [Britain] was becoming more peripheral. This was all said in 1989, to which Kenzaburo Oe replies that he thinks, "Well, Japan might be dominant economically." In 1989, it looked like Japan was an unstoppable economy juggernaut, but he made a distinction between being economically dominant in arenas like banking or commerce or high technology, or whatever, and culturally dominant. And, he said, Japan is undeniably a giant economically, but culturally, that isn't the case.

And so, with Japanese authors, too, perhaps he was implying they had to write from the periphery of world culture.

3. Oe and Ishiguro, 119.

CW: How do you feel that applies to the literature of Britain today?
KI: I think our situation has changed somewhat. When I was talking to Oe in 1989, I was still scraping in as the younger generation. I was thirty-five or something at the time, and we were perhaps the first generation that clearly had registered that Britain wasn't the head of this big global empire and that we couldn't automatically assume people around the world would be fascinated by the ins and outs of how British society was run.

Particularly, a certain kind of British novel that had thrived, that assumed that the British class war or describing how British society worked (in terms of class or how people emerged from one class or another) that had been very prevalent perhaps in the '50s or '60s was no longer so. Our generation was very conscious that this was of very limited interest to people outside of the British community. Whereas once upon a time—by virtue of the fact that Britain was a dominant cultural force—people all around the world, if they weren't interested, they should be, because British culture was important. It was a sort of cultural system that many countries were aspiring towards or trying to copy in the Empire.

CW: How would you contrast these gradual changes in the history of British literary culture with, say, American literary culture?
KI: I think suddenly, because of historical reasons, British writers who had always thought all they had to do was simply describe British life and they would automatically be writing novels of international appeal, interest, and relevance, suddenly found themselves writing small provincial novels.

And, this question about "the way history is moving"—I was suggesting perhaps that even American writers had now got themselves into this position by virtue of the dominance of American culture. That someone who wrote what was essentially an inward looking novel just describing some aspect of American cultural life could almost accidentally—because of the dominant position of America in world society—claim to have written a novel of universal relevance.

If people in Kuala Lumpur who were not interested in hearing about how people in New York dinner parties behaved, well they damn well should be, because America is such a force. And, American culture was in some way something that everyone around the world has to understand, because it's coming into their lives directly or indirectly.

American writers perhaps today are the ones who don't have to make an effort to write internationally by virtue of the fact that they are American.

However provincial a novel they write, their writing is international, whereas the British have lost that automatic status.

CW: How do you or other British writers of your generation respond to these movements?
KI: I think our generation was the first to recognize that [loss of status], and to some extent, perhaps went overboard in trying to compensate for that. They're always setting books in past eras or in foreign places; they're trying very self-consciously to write international novels. And, that roughly was my view of how things were here in Britain at the time when I spoke to Oe.

To some extent, I think that continues to apply. But I think the book world has changed. New markets have appeared; the whole globalization process has gotten more complicated and complex.

Now I think there is a lot of writing that appears that can find quite a big market that has just appeared in domestic markets which some people refer to here in Britain as the new middle ground. They're [these novels are] written without great literary aspirations, but nevertheless they're written by bright, educated people to entertain quite lightly other bright, educated people.

They don't claim to be great literature, but they're to entertain people on subways as they go back from work. And some of them might well be interesting at the literary level, but they're not really aimed at that.

There's a lot of writing being published in Britain of that sort that just reflects the everyday, about people having love affairs in the office or stuff like that. *Bridget Jones* represents a kind of apex of that kind of writing on the female side.[4] Certain other writers like Nick Hornby have enormous success, and in their way, they are very important writers. They write a certain kind of book that doesn't, on the surface anyway, try to be literary, doesn't try to be international. But nevertheless, you know, with hindsight, they might prove to be very interesting books that tell us a lot about these times we're living through.

By and large I would say that trend has continued that I was describing to Oe; authors writing about past wars—like Pat Barker's First World War trilogy—these are all books set in previous wars written by authors now who are around my age in the last few years.

What's interesting, too, is that with writers of an earlier generation like Beryl Bainbridge or Penelope Fitzgerald you can see a shift in their writing;

4. Helen Fielding, *Bridget Jones's Diary: A Novel* (New York: Viking, 1996).

[they're] now writing stuff that was perhaps more autobiographical to writing period fiction or historical fiction. Their writing seems to have gained a new wind quite late in their careers as a result of that.

CW: Do you have a kind of ideal reader in mind as you're writing your novels?
KI: No, I have a very confused sense of the person I am writing for. I think inevitably this has to do increasingly with a practical thing. When I publish a book, I actually go around the world doing book events or being interviewed by people. And so, in a very obvious literal way, I think some impression of all these people that I've talked to somehow remains somewhere in the back of my mind when I'm writing.

I'm not suggesting I think very consciously about just a particular audience in Seattle or a particular person who interviewed me in Norway. All these experiences kind of mass together to create some conglomerate kind of reader. And this figure is a very confusing and sometimes intimidating figure, particularly because of what you might call the globalization trend.

When I started to write fiction, this imagined reader was someone more or less my age and someone from my background, but as I started to travel more widely and the more I've been made to realize that people in different countries have quite different sets of assumptions and different local knowledge will come to my books, I think I've become more and more aware and self-conscious about this reader that is in my head.

Let's say the imagined reader is a Norwegian—and so, immediately a lot of things that I might write go out the window. I think, I can't make local references to things in London that would be incomprehensible to the guy in Norway; I can't make too many puns or use that line I was so proud of just because the words are so neat and come out so beautifully and appropriately—I can't quite be so proud of that, because by the time it's translated into Norwegian, it's not going to have that surface gloss to it.

So I have to really ask myself, "Does the line have substance? It's not just a clever line, is it? Does its value survive translation?"

CW: How do you envision this imagined reader in other aspects of your writing?
KI: In terms of theme, I might suppose that some big issue that's exercising people here in Britain at the moment might make a good theme for a novel, but once again, this reader looking over my head—let's say [this reader] is

Norwegian, but might also be from Denver or whatever—well, it might not be such a big deal to this person.

I think that the wider one is made to travel, the more one is made to answer to people from different cultures with different priorities. The more confused and complicated becomes this imagined reader. And sometimes, it can be inhibiting and paralyzing and demanding.

CW: You have discussed the critical reception of your work and have remarked that you were surprised by use of words like "restrained," "subtle," or "quiet" to describe the substance of your novels. Has knowledge of such criticism deflected you from trying something, or has it encouraged and motivated you to try other things? Is there a direct relationship between what your critics say with what you've done as a writer?
KI: I don't know if it's necessarily a direct one, but I can't divorce what critics say. What I mean by that is I usually read the large body of reviews. I never pay that much attention to any individual review. But, in a way, one of the privileges of being able to publish internationally is that you get this very large range of reviews coming from quite different cultural backgrounds and from different kinds of literary cultures. And so, when a consensus does seem to appear amongst people, I can't pretend that it's not relevant. Whatever I make of it, this is to some extent the true reflection of how people responded to my work.

It's not to do with some peculiarly distorted atmosphere that exists only in London literary circles, but also people in Germany or people in the midwest of America, or people in Tokyo are all saying the same thing. It is a rather useful gauge for any given point in time of how whatever I have produced has been received by a very broad range of people.

But I can't divorce that critical response from what I might get from ordinary readers I meet at book events. All this kind of public does have an effect, because I do think of writing these days as a kind of communication process. Partly because of this business of having to go on the road and meeting readers, I am very conscious of it being a communication process. It's not just that I happen to produce this thing and that accidentally, other people have come across it. I am actually trying to gauge how people receive certain things I do, what they understand, and what they don't understand, what they find too much, what they find funny or don't find funny.

I think these things are important, because in a way, this is how I learn about other people and how similar or not they are to me in my response.

CW: How important is this meeting of minds for you?
KI: Earlier I was saying—when you asked me about what kind of truth does a novelist aspire to—I thought of this in the form of a question: "Doesn't it feel like this to you as well? This is how it looks like to me." It's that sort of question one is posing to other people, so what they say in return is quite important.

But I don't really respond so much in terms to a number of critics saying maybe I should write more like this, more like that; I don't go away and then do it.

You know, the summaries of books are to me just as interesting in a way as the assessment of books. When they do their kind of summary, to me it's very interesting how they summarize the book, what they feel are the essential things about the book, how they read certain things. Did that come over with the emphasis I wanted?

About *The Remains of the Day*, early on I would say I became very resistant to a lot of people talking about my books in terms of their Japanese-ness, as though my books were only of relevance if you are interested in Japanese society. I'm talking about my early books now. My writing a book set entirely in England with no references to Japan—perhaps that decision to do that was clearly prompted by a large body of opinion that tended to see my work as attempts to illuminate certain historical or sociological ideas about Japanese society.

CW: Such cumulative responses have prompted you to examine your development as a writer?
KI: In *The Remains of the Day*, that's an example where I'm not responding to one or two critics giving me advice on how to write. Rather, there's an overall sense of dissatisfaction that, more than I would like, people were reading my early Japanese novels for information, as though I could reveal interesting information in the way that an anthropologist or someone writing about Japanese culture in a non-fiction way might be able to do.

I felt perhaps that the more universal things I wanted to say about people and life were getting rather obscured. Instead of saying, "Oh, yes, that's how I feel," they'll attempt to say, "Isn't that interesting how Japanese people feel."

The Japanese setting [of the early novels] was to some extent limiting the response and slightly leading to a misreading of my intentions. So, that's one example of a decision being prompted by some overall perception of the way the books are being read.

CW: In your fifth novel, *When We Were Orphans*, readers shouldn't expect to find some factual truth about Shanghai in the 1930s that they hadn't known from the history books?
KI: I don't think so, no. All I've done is researched books that are readily available. I have one or two books that I got from rare book shops, books written at the time [of the 1930s], but as far as I know there is nothing contained in them that isn't generally known. There's stuff about the opium trade—everyone knows that—and any book on Shanghai would go through those things.

People are interested in Shanghai. I could probably recommend a whole number of very good books on the subject written by disciplined people who aspire to the art of research, who look through evidence and come to a conclusion.

I'm using [Shanghai] as some sort of metaphorical landscape. I'm a very treacherous person; I wouldn't trust a writer like me to learn about historical details (laughs).

CW: Will you comment on the significance of themes or motifs in *When We Were Orphans*? Themes or subjects like orphans, greatness by association which we saw in *The Remains of the Day*. . .
KI: The orphans business, it's not just about being literally orphaned. Of course, there are characters who are literally orphans—their parents have died or disappeared—in this book. There was a metaphorical direction in this condition of being orphaned. What I was interested in exploring here was the journey that we all must have made out of a protective childhood bubble where we didn't know about the harsher world.

As we get older we come into the wider world and learn that bad things happen. And sometimes, that process occurs gently and softly; sometimes to some people it happens very suddenly or very violently. So Christopher Banks, the main character, lives in this relatively sheltered cocoon or childhood, and he has a child's view of the world, and he thinks he's got big problems, but they're just small childhood problems about not getting into trouble, or whatever.

Suddenly, he is plunged into the big world. It's that question: when we go out into the harsher world do we perhaps carry with us some sense of nostalgia, some sense of memory of that time when we believed the world to be a nicer place? Perhaps we were misled by adults; perhaps quite rightly, we were sheltered from these things.

Then we go out into the larger world to find that there are nasty things, difficult things. Sometimes perhaps, we still carry some memory of that more innocent view that we had as a child, and we have an urge to reshape the world, heal the world, to make it the way we once thought it was as children.

So, this latest book is very much about someone who loses that childhood garden of paradise very suddenly. For years, as he grows up, unconsciously perhaps, his big aim in life is to fix that thing that went wrong then, so that he can pick up where he left off.

When I say "orphan," it's in that very broader sense of having left the protective world of childhood that I am referring to.

CW: How is "nostalgia" rooted in Christopher's historical sense of that past?
KI: The theme of nostalgia in the deep sense of the word—I don't necessarily mean that kind of nostalgia that is sometimes peddled by tourist industries around the world, some sort of sweet or cozy past when we lived in a more innocent preindustrial time or something. I'm talking about the more pure, personal sense of nostalgia for one's childhood.

Sometimes I think nostalgia of that sort can be a very positive force, as well as a very destructive force, because like idealism is to the intellect, that kind of nostalgia has the same relationship to the emotions. You remember a time emotionally when you thought the world was a better place.

And, of course, sometimes it can lead you to behave in a very destructive way, but it can also lead you to want to make things better.

CW: Imperialist themes seem important in your novels. One's denial, culpability, or responsibility to an historical unfolding appears in some form in all your novels. What about here?
KI: I don't have anything great to say about imperialism that hasn't already been said. Those themes are there in the book but there's nothing particularly startling on imperialism.

It's a slightly different kind of imperialism involved in this book, because it's not official imperialism. We're not talking about a situation like India [in a similar period], for instance, where the British are officially in power and India is a colony. We're talking about unofficial imperialism where Shanghai was basically a Chinese city but the foreigners had won this thing called "extra-territoriality" which meant that they were not subject to Chinese law.

It's terribly humiliating for the Chinese to have all these foreign industrialists come into their city and decide they are not subject to Chinese law. But those were the military facts of the time. And this is one of the things that led to great hatred of the foreigner.

So really, this is a different kind of backdrop: you have rival powers—British, Japanese, American, all trying to dominate economically, industrially to exploit China—but with none of that sense of responsibility that came with colonizing countries in the imperial sense.

Even though it might have been self-deception on the part of the British rulers [when it came to India], there was a big idea of teaching [natives] the English way of life and the English system. It was a complicated process; it wasn't just simple exploitation. I don't think the people in Shanghai felt any such obligation; in many ways, you could say they had lots of the benefits of having colonized people without any of the responsibilities. But there wasn't any one power in charge there. It's a bit loose to call it an Empire situation because it wasn't.

CW: What about the knowledge that Christopher has revealed to him about his parents' disappearance? Should we read it as a parable of struggle?
KI: I don't know—I mean, partly, the book takes the form of a kind of pastiche; these mysteries are set up and to some extent, I felt that to satisfy the narrative style, you had to have answers, and so mysteries are resolved at that level. They're sometimes resolved at much deeper levels. I don't know if I intended anything massive by some of those revelations; they're to make the plot work to a certain extent.

Perhaps there is something about Christopher discovering that here's a man who thought he was fighting evil, and then he comes to discover that he has benefitted from this evil.

It's not some evil that is easily contained in a villain or some master criminal—I mean, you can't compartmentalize evil into a clear source. It is all pervading, and people who meant well end up sometimes contributing to evil. He is just an innocent child at the time and innocently ends up benefitting from evil.

He sets off at the beginning of the book with a very simplistic idea of how to fight evil as a detective: you unmask criminals, put the evil genie back in the bottle. And, at the end he discovers that the nature of evil is a very complicated interrelationship between things, and it is very hard not to be surrounded or engulfed by it yourself.

CW: I was at a conference once, and one of the charges against your work was that your representations of women were limiting. Someone pointed out, though, that your first novel was in the first-person voice of a woman. What about the women in your most recent novel? Jennifer, Sarah, and Mother all figure quite prominently in Christopher's quest . . .
KI: Well, I don't know. I'm not very conscious when I'm writing a novel as to which characters are male and which characters are female ones. Of course, to a certain extent, I'm aware of it, but you don't write novels necessarily trying to deed out points or whatever to different groups or ethnic groups or gender groups. You create characters that interact, and that's the way it ends up.

It's kind of hard for me to talk in one breath about a character like, say, Sachiko in *A Pale View of Hills* and Jennifer in the latest book. Of course, they're both female, but they play very different roles and they're very different characters. Beyond the fact that they're female, I'm not sure . . .

CW: Well, they do share a role in that they allow the main character to work through his or her anxieties. In other words, Etsuko appropriates Sachiko's story; Christopher does the same with Jennifer—she's an orphan, and he relates to her in the way he wished he might have been treated as an orphan.
KI: Yes, that's fair enough. I don't know if it's necessarily accurate to say that whenever a female character appears in my novels, they play that similar or parallel role. In a way, one has to take them one by one.

Miss Kenton in *The Remains of the Day* plays one kind of role; she becomes somebody Stevens might have loved. But at the end of his life, she becomes the personification of the life of the emotions that he missed. Other times during the novel, she stands for other things in his life. Early in the novel, she's the person who tries to tell him what his father is, but he himself won't admit to it.

The relationship between Christopher and Sarah has superficial resemblances perhaps to Stevens and Miss Kenton's relationship. But I think it's quite different in a way; they're more like people who recognize they've been given the same kind of burdens by life, and they compare notes about how to deal with this.

At a certain point, Sarah takes a view that you can't keep looking back and trying to heal or fix things that can't be fixed from the past. One has to get on with life.

And I guess Christopher—not intellectually but with his feet, you know—takes the other viewpoint, which is that, no, no, you can't get on with anything until you sort out the baggage from the past. There's no room for anything or

anybody until this is sorted out. So [Sarah] becomes somebody he looks on as a comparison or somebody who is in a similar situation to himself.

CW: This novel is somewhat more graphic than your previous ones in terms of detailing. I'm thinking particularly of the bombing scene when Christopher stumbles upon the little girl whose brother lies dead, and his entrails are "like the decorative tails of a kite [which] had unfurled over the matting" (271).
KI: I don't think I've ever had occasion in the past to describe war scenes—you know, scenes of carnage. This one seemed to call for it.

Yes, the other books have been in the shadow of bombings or war, but this is the only time I think I've been required to take a character through that kind of horror. I try to figure out a way in which to write it up.

CW: There's the scene when Christopher brings out his magnifying glass to look at the dead mother—it seems to be a reaction of shock—but it's also alarming to have "Akira" giggling the whole time this is happening . . .
KI: That question, "Is Christopher in shock?"—I'm not sure if he is in shock or whether, because he is so enclosed in his own world, he is just in his own past. I think that perhaps it takes him awhile to let go of this idea that he's the detective investigating or trying to combat evil with his magnifying glass.

The business of the magnifying glass was one of the images I had before I started the book. I would start with this almost comic-book type hero, and it's in his head: he had a self-image of being one of these kinds of detective from a detective novel.

He had this magnifying glass, and he would investigate high society crimes. By the end, he'll be doing the same thing in war zones trying to find out who the murderer is. That to me was one of the things that framed the concept of the book for me.

He took an unsophisticated view of what evil was, that it was something contained and that all you had to do was unmask it in the way you do in the genre detective story. I took that notion and threw this detective into a turmoil of the twentieth century—like the start of the Second World War—and see how he does. See if this is the way to solve things.

And, yes, it's supposed to be a kind of black comedy and slightly poignant as well. Here he is trying to solve this big murder mystery—Who killed this particular person?—and, of course, there are hundreds of other blown [up] corpses all around him. He guesses he'll get around to those cases.

CW: I found that interplay between black comedy and poignancy very moving. I found aspects of each of your novels present in *When We Were Orphans.* You move from comedy to tragedy rapidly, and you created complex but sympathetic characters in fictionalized historical contexts. Do you find that the increasing complexity of your characters corresponds to some development of yourself as a writer?
KI: I don't really think of addressing my needs as a writer specifically. I try to make my writing somehow address who I am as a person. When I published *The Unconsoled,* I was often asked why apparently I had changed things so much. The only answer I could come up with is that I had changed quite a lot over time.

A book like *The Remains of the Day* was written from the same assumptions that got me started writing; it's a rewrite of a rewrite of *A Pale View of Hills.* And so those first three books came out of a sensibility of somebody in his mid-twenties.

And then I discovered that I was quite a different person with a quite different view of how life worked by the time I was forty.

CW: Change can be a gradual process, but was there something in your life specifically which caused an upheaval?
KI: Not during my writing life—there's no sort of monumental big thing. There's nothing equivalent to, say, my moving to Britain from Japan as a child—you could argue that becoming a more public figure as a writer somehow changed my relationship to the people around me. My position in the world changed slightly. But I don't know if it was that. I think it's more just becoming middle-aged and knowing from experience that life is harder to control than I had perhaps thought it was when I began my first three novels.

Those early novels are about people who go wrong in life in some way, who take wrong turns in life; they are perhaps underpinned by a sense that life is a clear path, a clear road down which you can come, and you start off with principles and values and then you go out there and you play out these values and you try very hard to stick to them. And, of course, you make mistakes or you backed the wrong team; the challenge is all about having the right values in the first place and somehow having the strength of character to stick to them. Those assumptions started to be modified as I got older.

Kazuo Ishiguro

Lewis Burke Frumkes / 2001

From *The Writer,* vol. 114, no. 5 (May 2001). Reprinted by permission of Lewis Burke Frumkes.

As a boy, Kazuo Ishiguro dreamed of being a musician. He eventually sent his songs to music publishers and subsequently learned about rejection, something he hasn't experienced as a writer.

Since writing his first novel, *A Pale View of Hills,* eighteen years ago, Ishiguro's work has been critically acclaimed. His novels include *An Artist of the Floating World* (Whitbread Book of the Year, 1986), *Remains of the Day* (Booker Prize for Fiction, 1989), *The Unconsoled* (1995), and *When We Were Orphans* (nominated for a Booker Prize, 2000).

"As soon as I started to write fiction, I almost immediately met with success," says Ishiguro. "The first few stories were published immediately in literary magazines. I was actually encouraged by my publishers, who gave me a contract in advance to finish the novel I was writing. A lot of things happen in life like that."

The author, who was born in Nagasaki, Japan, in 1954, came to England with his parents in 1960. The family had every intention of eventually going back to Japan, but stayed in England, where Ishiguro grew up straddling two worlds.

"I have a sense of having just left without saying goodbye, and of this whole other world just kind of fading away. . . . I have the feeling of this completely alternative person I should have become. There was another life that I might have had, but I'm having this one," says the writer, who considers his work to be international.

He attended the University of Kent at Canterbury and the University of East Anglia in Norwich, where he studied English, philosophy and creative writing.

"I served my creative apprenticeship for writing through the form of songs. I wrote over a hundred songs. I don't think it's such a jump from songs to stories. I can see when I look at first-time writers that they are going through the same phases I went through as a songwriter. I went through an intensely autobiographical stage, and then moved on to purple prose, very technical but self-indulgent. By the time I was toward the end of my songwriting period, I had found a style. It was very pared-down, simplified writing that was similar to my first short stories. To some extent, that is the style I have stuck with as a writer."

Ishiguro's work often deals with how people are shaped by events or circumstances in their pasts. *A Pale View of Hills* involves a widow in postwar Japan recalling her life in Nagasaki. In *The Remains of the Day* (which was made into an Academy Award–nominated film starring Anthony Hopkins and Emma Thompson), an English butler struggles with the changing class structures of postwar England. *When We Were Orphans* concerns a famous English detective who returns to his birthplace, Shanghai, to solve the mystery of his parents' disappearance many year earlier.

"The maze of human memory—the ways in which we accommodate and alter it, deceive and deliver ourselves with it—is territory that Kazuo Ishiguro has made his own," writes a *Book* magazine critic. In addition to five novels, Ishiguro has written several short stories. His work has been translated into twenty-eight languages. In 1995, he received the Order of the British Empire for service to literature.

Lewis Burke Frumkes: in *When We Were Orphans*, Christopher Banks, the central character, is a detective who moves to Shanghai. I read that your father was Japanese but lived in Shanghai. Did you spend any time in the city?
Kazuo Ishiguro: I don't know Shanghai firsthand at all. It's place that I have put together in this book from my association with that city at that time. It was a pre-Communist Shanghai. I learned about it through my father. There were a lot of photos that he had in an album. I couldn't quite believe that people I actually knew, who I always thought of as leading a very sedentary kind of life in England, had lived there. That my grandfather, who I knew as a small child, actually had lived in this wild and exotic place. That is what Shanghai was until the Japanese came, and then later the Communists took over.

This story takes place really between the turn of the century and 1937. That was the heyday of the old Shanghai, where huge fortunes could be

made, where different foreign communities lived together: British, American, French, and Japanese. The Chinese—the Communists and the Nationalists—were having an underground war with each other. The Russian refugees from the revolution had settled there. Jews from Europe found refuge there. Many strands of history and international commerce came together in Shanghai.

LBF: Within that framework, how did you make the novel historically accurate?
KI: It wasn't ever my intention to write a historical novel—it was the myth of Shanghai I found interesting. I feel I did sufficient and hard research. I have a pretty large collection of books at home about Shanghai during this period. I found that stuff written there at the time was the most interesting; the guidebooks published gave local histories.

One of the poignant things about books is that they are written by people who assume their community will be here forever. They talk in minute detail about where you can get Italian pastries, where the best tailor might be, or which is a good club. They talk about it as if these things were set in stone. Of course, you know full well when you are holding the book that within a handful of years it would all be wiped out. There's a certain poignancy about that.

LBF: Having done so much research on Shanghai, and having written this novel, do you feel like visiting the city, even though it has changed so dramatically?
KI: I'm only mildly curious. In fact, to some extent I feel that my imaginary cities are in competition with the real cities. The question of research has always been a vexing one for me. In my early writing life, I was writing books set in Japan. Then, too, I had a very ambivalent attitude toward being brought face to face with any kind of solid, real Japan. I had my own imaginary landscape of Japan, Shanghai, England.

For novelists, it is very important that you build that imaginary world in a solid way so that you get to know it. You get to know its peculiarities. You get to know to what extent it veers away from the realistic. You get to know whether it is a comic world, how the people in it behave, the atmosphere. To some extent, you get bogged down with too much information about a historical or real place. It gets in the way of building your world.

There's a big difference between research for a novelist and research for a historian or a travel writer. The nature of what you are trying to do as a writer of fiction is slightly different.

If people want to know about the history of Shanghai, there are very good books that I could point them to. In fact, an author of one of these books told me that I had actually caught it well. I was gratified to know that, because I don't want to distort things, I don't want to mislead people.

Essentially, as a novelist, this is a landscape that I am using for my imaginative purposes. To me, it's location hunting. I have a theme, a story, and I want to put them down where they can best be orchestrated. I needed a place for a childhood with the chaos of the modern world, with war and international issues as well. As long as I had those things, it could be anywhere.

LBF: Why did you make Christopher Banks a detective? You could have made him anything and still have looked into his past.
KI: There are various ways to answer that. One was that I became interested in a certain view of evil that seemed to exist in this genre of fiction—the notion that all the bad things that happen come from a master criminal somewhere, that there's a Moriarty figure behind the bad things. The way to conquer them is to become a detective and ferret out the source of evil. After World War I, it seems to me that there is a kind of a change, certainly in the English detective tradition. I think there is an awareness that evil and suffering don't really work like that. There is a generation that went through the trauma of modern warfare and realized that the bad things in life cannot emanate just from some clever evil character. It's something else altogether—chaos.

LBF: Christopher Banks has a Kafkaesque experience in his search. It's not always straightforward. It doesn't end with an evil criminal at work.
KI: It's not straightforward because he is a detective, because that is the view he starts out with. He thinks he can solve all of the bad things that have happened to him. Indeed, he wants to set the clock back and heal something that happened in his childhood. If only he can find the "baddies."

I'm slightly reluctant about calling it Kafkaesque, but it certainly gets surreal and bizarre. In the end, he is trying to fulfill an illogical mission. There is a part of him that refuses to let go of the idea. It takes him a long time to realize that some things remain broken forever. Yes, things get very strange for him. To some extent, it's a journey through his interior.

LBF: What kinds of books have inspired you? The opening line about 1923 and somewhere in the middle, when you wrote, "I would not see Sarah Hemmings again . . ." reminded me of Gatsby.

KI: I find this an interesting thing. There is often an assumption that the writers who you love the most are the ones you are influenced by the most, and that might be true for many writers. I don't think that it is for me. People who I have partially read or accidentally come across often influence me. There is some aspect of their writing that intrigues me. I like to write through the filter of memory. I like the atmosphere and the movements of the mind when it is remembering.

Proust is a good example. I've never read the entire novel [*Remembrance of Things Past*]; I've only read the first volume. The overture, the first sixty pages, that's where I got a lot of this stuff about mimicking the movement of memory in somebody's head. I read that between my first and second novels—it had a big impact on me. I realized that as a novelist, you did not necessarily have to tell a story by going from one solid, well-built scene to the next. You could actually mimic the way memory rubs through someone's mind. You can have a fragment of a scene dovetailed into a scene that takes place thirty years later. You don't have to have whole scenes. You can make references to things and come back to them later.

That whole atmosphere and mood—searching through that foggy world of memory to find out who you are, what your history is—fascinates me. That's an example of something I read at a time when I was searching as a writer, and I found it. I'm not a big Proust fan; I've hardly read him. I have to say, though, that he's had a profound influence on me.

LBF: What advice would you give to young writers?
KI: There is a tendency in the writing world today that I think young writers probably have to guard against. There is an environment in which it can be very tempting to not take on full responsibility for your own writing. You can write a bit and then take it to a group or teacher, and then they tell you what to do, and so on. I find this a very dangerous tendency. Writing well is about finding your own voice. There is no way around taking responsibility for your own writing.

There is something about the whole nature of creative writing groups in universities that you have to be very careful about. They can be tremendously encouraging and useful, but you can easily become dependent on other people. You can't write unless you commit.

Lewis Burke Frumkes is a frequent contributor to *The Writer* and a member of its editorial board.

Never Let Me Go: A Profile of Kazuo Ishiguro

John Freeman / 2005

From *Poets & Writers Magazine*, (May/June 2005). Reprinted by permission of the publisher, Poets & Writers, Inc., 72 Spring Street, New York, NY 10012. www.pw.org.

"Oh, you're making quite a mess of it, aren't you?" Kazuo Ishiguro studies my plate of scones with a raised eyebrow. It's teatime at a café called Richoux in Piccadilly, and my lesson in English manners and ritual is not going particularly well. Somehow, I have managed to scatter crumbs onto his side of the table. With ironic irritation, Ishiguro has another go at instruction: "First spread the crème down, and then place the preserves on top, like so," he says, preparing a scone that a still life painter could use. "Just think of it like putting blood on fresh snow." I take another swipe at it and build what looks like a bagel. Ishiguro frowns.

It's hard to tell whether or not this display of fastidiousness is a performance, a gambit in Ishiguro's strategy for our interview—the first, he later tells me, of up to three hundred he might give around the world during the coming year while promoting his new novel, *Never Let Me Go*, published by Knopf in April.

If this is the case, it would be hard to blame him. Ishiguro turned fifty last November and has come of age along with that promotional gulag known as the Author Tour. Most of his adult life has been spent writing novels (six, including this new one) and then talking about the process publicly. Not surprisingly, he has become quite good at controlling an interview's narrative. "You want to steer someone to a kind of revelation," says Ishiguro, revealing his hand somewhat, "but it has to seem natural, almost like a discovery."

Ishiguro's statement could be applied directly to his novels, all of which have been published in the United States, some making the best-seller lists. Best known for his Booker Prize–winner, *The Remains of the Day* (Knopf, 1989)—the story of a repressed butler who realizes he has given his life to an antiquated idea of service—Ishiguro has become the most voluptuously deceptive

storyteller writing in English. (His work also has been translated into twenty-eight other languages.) He has taken what novelist and critic James Wood calls the "reliably unreliable" narrator to its artistic zenith, creating characters so good at disguising themselves that, even after we have heard and seen them through an entire novel, they remain somewhat mysterious.

But while his facility has brought him accolades, Ishiguro admits there is a danger in being too good at the game of narrative trickery. "There's a certain way of telling a story," he says, speaking quickly in what the British once called a BBC accent: proper, middle class. His eyes are kind, but his tone is clipped. "There is a certain texture in your scenes that you become addicted to: the texture of memory. I have to be careful that I don't continue to use the same devices as I did in the past."

It is this texture, though, that has made his work from the beginning so assured, so potently inhabited. His first novel, *A Pale View of Hills* (Putnam, 1982), is told in the voice of a Japanese widow thinking back on her life and family, slowly coming to a realization about her daughter's suicide. In his second book, *An Artist of the Floating World*, a Japanese man tries to arrange his daughter's marriage as he struggles with the details of his earlier transgressions. Because both books are set in Japan, they were often viewed as veiled autobiography.

Ishiguro concedes there is a degree of accuracy to that perception. "To some extent, writing [*A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World*] was an act of preserving things that would have otherwise faded in my memory," he says. But he doesn't see the works as drawn predominantly from his life. And he's uncomfortable about the assumptions that have been made about him and his writerly aims. "People kept asking me if I were trying to be a bridge between East and West in Japan. It was a real burden, and I also felt like a complete charlatan. I wasn't in a position to be an expert."

Read through some of the several dozen interviews he's given over the past five years, and it's easy to see why Ishiguro might feel this way. Born in Nagasaki in 1954, he left Japan at age five and wound up in Surrey, in the south of England, with his family. Ishiguro's father, an oceanographer, was to be employed temporarily by the British government. Funding for his work was continually renewed, however, and they ended up staying. Ishiguro attended grammar school in Surrey, then went on to university at Kent, where he studied American literature and took degrees in English and philosophy.

After graduating in 1978, he was employed briefly as a social worker, before going back to school and getting an MA in creative writing at the University of

East Anglia (Britain's equivalent of the Iowa Writers' Workshop). His first published work appeared in 1981 in a Faber anthology, which included three of his stories. One of those eventually became *A Pale View of Hills*. In 1983, *Granta* placed him on its first list of the 20 Best Writers Under 40, alongside Ian McEwan and Salman Rushdie. In 1986, he married his Glaswegian wife, Lorna. And in 1992 they had a daughter, Naomi. It wasn't until 1989 that Ishiguro returned to Japan for the first time, on a book tour.

As he told Maya Jaggi in the *Guardian* in 1995: "I had very strong emotional relationships in Japan that were severed at a formative age. . . . I've only recently become aware that there's this other life I might have had, a whole person I was supposed to become."

That sense of loss delicately inflects Ishiguro's new novel, *Never Let Me Go*, which is his most radical stylistic departure to date. All of his other books are set in a recognizable historical context, from the backdrop of a ravaged Shanghai during the Sino-Japanese War in *When We Were Orphans* (Knopf, 2000) to the crumbling decline of Empire in *The Remains of the Day* to the post–World War II devastation of *A Pale View of Hills*.

Never Let Me Go, however, steps outside of history, planting itself in a kind of alternative England in the 1990s. Whereas Philip Roth's most recent novel, *The Plot Against America*, used a slight alteration in American political history as its foundation, *Never Let Me Go* changes a major detail in the realm of science. It imagines a world in which genetic cloning—not nuclear technology—turns out to be the defining science of the twentieth century.

To describe just what kind of book this creates is difficult. While the story has futuristic qualities, *Never Let Me Go* is free of the gadgetry and technology salient in most science fiction. The novel exists in a world whose contours we must infer, rather than witness, which gives it an ominous cast. At any reference to "sci-fi," Ishiguro bristles. "When I am writing fiction, I don't think in terms of genre at all. I write a completely different way. It starts with ideas."

Even though *Never Let Me Go* takes Ishiguro beyond his normal style, the book circles the same thematic territory of memory that his other books traverse. As the story unfolds, Ishiguro's protagonist, Kathy H., thinks back on her childhood, spent in a rural English boarding school called Hailsham. Instead of telling us about students who have become famous politicians or society mavens, "Kath" describes the achievements of her alumni, most of whom have become "carers" and "donors."

It takes a while for the reader to understand what this means, but one thing is clear: At thirty-one, Kathy does not have much time left to live, and telling her story is a way to make sense of the miniature crises and spectacles of her pre-shortened life. Ishiguro says he used the book's premise as a "metaphor for how we all live," calling to mind William Golding's similarly otherworldly novel, *Lord of the Flies*. "I just concertina-ed the time span through this device. A normal life span is between sixty to eighty-five years; these people [in *Never Let Me Go*] artificially have that period shortened. But basically they face the same questions we all face."

The gap between the enormities of what Ishiguro's characters have to forfeit as donors and carers and the relative shallowness of the day-to-day concerns that Kath describes as she looks back at her younger years gives *Never Let Me Go* an eerie poignancy. As Kath remembers it, her friends were hormone-crazy, keen on sex, and hell-bent on being cool. They listened to music on Walkmans and speculated about their teachers. They were typical teenagers. But all the while, their school kept them in the dark about what exactly awaited them in the world outside. Only Kathy, her friend, Tommy, and Tommy's girlfriend, Ruth, had the intellectual curiosity to figure out the parameters of their future. *Never Let Me Go* recounts the story of how their relationships came apart in the face of that realization.

The construct of *Never Let Me Go* allowed Ishiguro to explore a dark, basic question. "What really matters if you know that this is going to happen to you?" Ishiguro asks, referring to death. "What are the things you hold on to, what are the things you want to set right before you go? What do you regret? What are the consolations? What are the things you feel you have to do before you go? And also the question is, what is all the education and culture for if you are going to check out?" Given the urgency in Ishiguro's voice, these may not be only artistic concerns but personal ones as well. Based on early responses to his novel, they seem to be concerns that will be shared by readers. The book has already received starred reviews in *Publishers Weekly*, *Kirkus Reviews*, and *Library Journal*.

When Ishiguro began *Never Let Me Go*, it was set in America in the 1950s, about lounge singers trying to make it to Broadway. "The book would both be about that world and resemble its songs," Ishiguro says, "but then a friend came over for dinner and he asked me what I was writing. I didn't want to tell him what I was writing, because I don't like to do that. So I told him one of my other projects. I said, 'Maybe I'll write this book about cloning.' "

A year later, Ishiguro had given up on his original setting and themes and was polishing the book that has just hit the stands.

It's doubtful that Ishiguro will revisit his first idea. After all, he has already lived it in a certain way. He devoted the early part of his life to dreams of a career in music, writing his own songs and recording and sending out demos. "A lot of people, when they first start to write, copy the things they've read, and they write about the things they've experienced. I basically did all that with songwriting," he says. Ishiguro never hit the road with his act, but he did burn off much of his teenage angst. And he still plays the piano to relax today. But he has added another creative outlet to his fiction writing.

Even since *The Remains of the Day* was made into a movie, with a screenplay by Booker-winner Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Ishiguro has been working on screenplays himself. In 2003, his original screenplay, *The Saddest Music in the World*, was made into a movie starring Isabella Rossellini. In the fall, a film based on another of his screenplays, *The White Countess*, starring Ralph Fiennes and Vanessa Redgrave, will be released in the United States.

Judging by his interest in film (Ishiguro admits to having a home theater, and he has designs on building a film library), the coming years will bring more films, along with the fiction he has in the pipeline, about all of which he is typically reticent. It's a good life, of this he is aware, but the shadow of what would have happened had his family returned to Japan is ever present. Each day he lives this life, Kazuo Ishiguro knows he's forfeiting another one. It's why he keeps writing, imagining people in worlds not quite his own, people who must make their separate peace with opportunities missed, and say their goodbyes to the past.

Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro

Karen Grigsby Bates / 2005

From *Day to Day on NPR Radio* (May 4, 2005). © 2005, National Public Radio, Inc.

Alex Chadwick, host: This is *Day to Day* from NPR News. I'm Alex Chadwick. Loss, memory, regret. Writer Kazuo Ishiguro explores these issues beautifully in all six of his novels. The most famous, *The Remains of the Day*, is set in England just before the Second World War. His most recent work, *Never Let Me Go*, is set in contemporary England with a disturbing twist. Kazuo Ishiguro spoke to *Day to Day's* Karen Grigsby Bates.

Kazuo Ishiguro (KI): In this novel, *Never Let Me Go*, the kids start off in a kind of boarding school, and they're literally sealed off from the rest of the world. But at some level, I think most childhoods are like that. Most childhoods should be like that. Certainly, when my daughter was younger, I tried to keep her in a bubble, sealed off from the realities of the world that actually awaited her. Even though, physically, we took her everywhere. It struck me how quickly even total strangers would enter into this conspiracy with myself and my wife to keep her in this bubble. Everybody wanted to censor out the sadnesses of the world. They desperately wanted this little child to be deceived about how nice a place the world was. Strangers passing in the street would turn themselves into little Disney cartoon characters and talk in a funny voice. We all seem to instinctively feel this urge and the majority of us are lucky enough to have this protective bubble early on.

I guess we might look back to that, and we realize that, okay, we were fooled to some extent, but perhaps we hold in our hearts to some extent a memory of the time when we thought the world was a slightly kinder place than the one we eventually found it to be. And so, I think that sense of nostalgia is quite important. It's almost like that kind of nostalgia is to the

feelings, to the emotions what idealism is to the intellect. It's a way of holding in your memory a picture of a better world than the one we find ourselves in.

Karen Grigsby Bates (KGB): You are Japanese which would probably confuse some people merely listening to you because they can't see you. Born in Nagasaki?
KI: That's right.

KGB: Moved to England when you were about five years old? And, grew up there ever since?
KI: Yes.

KGB: It's interesting, I read somewhere, I believe it was an interview you have with *The Guardian*, that you said your parents who have lived in England as long as you have still consider themselves "Japanese living amongst the English." You, on the other hand, what do you consider yourself?
KI: Oh, I consider myself British I suppose, because, you know, I've grown up and I've been shaped by Britain. I've been educated entirely in Britain. But, on the other hand, when I was growing up, I grew up in this home with Japanese parents, speaking Japanese. Perhaps most crucially—yes—in this home where my parents didn't have the attitude of immigrants but of visitors—temporary visitors—the idea was that we'd always go back within the next two years. And so, I think perhaps I did grow up observing the English around me at a slight distance, and many things that my friends thought were absolute right and wrongs, that they'd been taught by their parents, I realize that they were just tribal customs, because that's how my parents regarded them. Particularly the England I arrived in 1960 was still nominally a very Christian community. People went to church. There were all these things to do with good manners and protocol that were very important. And, of course, these things were very different within our house. So, I was always taught to respect the English manners and mores, but they were very much what the natives did. And something like the English class system was something that I felt I was on the outside of, whereas all my friends grew up very, very concerned about class. Because their parents were, whereas my own parents couldn't even interpret the class signals. And we didn't really understand. It was like a cold civil war going on in the country between the classes, and I was kind of on the outside of it.

KGB: It might have been for the best.
KI: Yes, I'll say it was.

KGB: Are there similarities between the two countries in terms of—I'm looking at *Never Let Me Go* and thinking again how reserved some of the people in this book are. We tend to think of the Japanese as reserved, at least in their interactions with us. I don't know, when they go home and close the door at night, maybe all hell breaks loose and we have no idea what's going on, and it's a party all the time! But, in general, we tend to think of them as emotionally withholding to a certain degree, very concerned with protocol . . . but to do the correct thing, to not give offense, to present oneself as a civilized person. Am I overreaching? Are there commonalities between the two that you've observed?
KI: Between the British and the Japanese, you're talking about? At that kind of surface . . . . but I think that's just on the surface. But yes, there is a certain kind of style, a surface style that is very similar which does have to do with restraint . . . But, I think that's purely at the surface level. Just traveling around the world I sense that every community, every nation has its own set of strategies for actually protecting the inner emotions. And here in America, you know people do—particularly on the West Coast I noticed—people do seem to be more open at one level. You actually meet somebody and they do start telling you about their life and—they tell you about their divorce and . . .

KGB: Whether you want them to or not!
KI: Over the years—and I've been coming to America since I was nineteen years old—I can't help feeling that this is just another strategy, that there's a kind of personality that has been carefully constructed for presentation purposes. And it's quite difficult to get beneath this first presented figure that talks about the divorce and how they felt, and whatever. I mean, it's just another way of putting up a shield. I found the fear of emotions, the fear of exposing oneself—that is universal in almost every culture, just that different societies have different kinds of protection, different kinds of armor.

KGB: What do you want readers to take away from *Never Let Me Go*?
KI: Well, that's a very big question. I guess when people have come up to me at these events and try to sum up their response, the ones I've been most pleased with probably are the people who've said, "This is a very sad novel,

but there was something also quite affirming in it, because the characters are so decent. But, it's terribly sad." That response is probably closest to what I was trying to get at. You know, the fact is, yes, we will all fade away and die, but people can find the energy to create little pockets of happiness and decency while we're here. I'm probably less excited when people come and say, "Oh, this is a chilling warning about the way we're going with cloning and biotechnology." That's fine, I'm perfectly open to people reading it that way, but if that's all they've got out of it, then I feel that the inner heart of the book has been missed.

KGB: I would think that if I were someone who knew that the clock was ticking a little more quickly than for the rest of everyone else, this would be a comforting book, because part of what I got from it was the message to do the things that you want to do while you have a chance to do them, because you don't necessarily know how much time is unspooling out before you. But you do know what you have right here, right now.
KI: I think that element has always been in my work. In a book like *The Remains of the Day*, books like that, I used to take—when I was a young man—I used to often look at life with the eyes of an elderly man looking back. And I guess the message I was giving myself, and perhaps my readers, was that it goes by really quickly. Life just slips through your hands, and the opportunities just slip through your hands, and you often don't know what the key turning points were until it's too late. You can have the best intentions, but because you don't have tremendous perspective, you can just let things go past. And before you know it, you have a wasted life. That was, I guess, very much there in my earlier books. Although here I'm looking at young people, ostensibly young people, I think that same feeling is there. I've shortened their lives artificially, if you like, to create that same effect.

KGB: It's like the Bob Dylan song, "I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now"?
KI: I guess so, that perhaps is a comment about the wisdom and energy of youth, and I sometimes feel I don't know if I apply it to the themes in my book. But I feel that as a novelist sometimes—and I've been quoted as saying this when I was younger and I've been haunted by it all the time—that novelists (perhaps not other kinds of writers) tend to peak in their thirties, just a few years after footballers. And you can check this out by looking in literary

encyclopedias to see when most writers did their best work. But, there's a tendency to think of the grand old figures as being the great writers. They might be, but they're being lauded for work they did when they were young. And I sometimes feel like that—it's interesting you have that phrase from Dylan—I sometimes feel that the twenty-five-year-old writer that I was could teach me a lot of things today.

KGB: Well, here's hoping that you are truly middle aged at fifty and we'll have you around for a while longer, and that you'll produce more—that you didn't peak at thirty-two. Kazuo Ishiguro is the author of six novels, including *The Remains of the Day*. His newest novel is *Never Let Me Go*. He joined us here at the studios at NPR West. Thank you so much for coming in.
KI: Thank you.

A Conversation about Life and Art with Kazuo Ishiguro

Cynthia F. Wong and Grace Crummett / 2006

Previously unpublished. Printed by permission of Cynthia F. Wong and Grace Crummett.

Kazuo Ishiguro met with Cynthia Wong and Grace Crummett at the Richoux Piccadilly in London on October 13, 2006, where the following conversation took place.

Kazuo Ishiguro (KI): I think the whole process of "the interview" is interesting. Interviews can be given under very different conditions. Sometimes there's plenty of time to think about each thing which people then edit very carefully afterwards, and sometimes you may be dealing with a radio interview that was live, or it's the twenty-second interview of the day. . .

Cynthia Wong (CW): Brian Shaffer and I liked the live radio interview that you gave to Don Swaim in 1990, which is also available on the internet. And, we found informative your recent National Public Radio interview with Karen Grigsby Bates.

KI: This is what I find interesting about the interview, even the messy aspects of it. An interview can give you an idea of how a writer was responded to at a particular point in time—a range of attitudes about that author can come through in the conversation. You probably get some human dimension to the person interviewed: are they touchy? Are they insecure? Are they smugly arrogant? Do they seem proud of their work, or do they not? To me, these things can be more interesting than the actual statements that are made. Statements that are made may not be that clear or that thought through.

CW: Are you self-conscious when you are being interviewed? Do you have an interview persona?

KI: It depends very much on the situation. There are so many different kinds of interviews. When anything is done on a tour, for instance, it is almost impossible

to approach a topic freshly, because you're faced with the same range of questions. You're being asked similar questions in, say, four interviews per day. In a live interview, the audience asks similar kinds of questions as well. Then, people take you out to dinner and ask you the same questions while you're trying to eat. It's almost impossible to find the energy to treat each interview in a different way, to figure out what this person really wants to know and to make [the encounter] a true meeting of the minds between interviewer and interviewee.

But, if you do it in isolation and you do it with plenty of time—somebody comes over here or something—then sometimes you get something that isn't something that I always say. An interesting interview takes you into territory that is quite unfamiliar.

CW: I want to ask you about the [Man] Booker Prize. You have been short-listed for the two latest novels and, altogether, four times in your writing career—and, of course winning it for *The Remains of the Day*. What are your views on the Prize? What does it means to be on the short list, and to win it?

KI: By and large, I'm in favor of the Booker Prize. It has its drawbacks, but I've been around long enough to see what's happened to literary fiction in this country, and the Booker Prize is crucial to the changes that took place. At the most basic level, the Booker Prize is a publicity gimmick, but that's why it's so powerful. So far in this country, the Booker Prize, unlike other kinds of prizes, has managed to break into the mainstream audience. It did so around 1980. I think it had been in existence for some years at that time, but nobody had paid very much attention to it.

Then it was handled very skillfully by a group of people who took charge of the Booker Prize, and they turned it into a kind of competition with the short list. They put it on live television. This contest element came into it and bookshops started to support it. They got bookies who normally back horses to get involved, to offer odds as to who might win it. It became almost like a national sport, so even people who aren't particularly interested in books became curious about who might win this year's Booker Prize. It was a process that turned literary novelists into something that was much more received by the mainstream.

CW: Is that a good or a bad thing?

KI: It's both. When I was a creative writing student in the 1980s, all the figures of British fiction at that time were not people you would find in glossy

magazines. They were very much respected among a small elite group of people—very much like musical conductors would be today. I'm talking about writers like Iris Murdoch—or people who taught me, like Malcolm Bradbury—and also Angus Wilson, John Fowles, William Golding. If we made it in this field like them, we would occupy some relatively dusty corner of the library. We may have glory and prestige, but we weren't going to make huge money out of it. All this changed enormously in the 1980s, when literary fiction could turn up in a bestseller list. It first happened only to Booker shortlisted or actual winners, and then it seemed to have a larger effect.

I hesitate to say it was *just* the Booker Prize—there were many other factors, such as a demographic one. There was a much bigger educated audience out there who was no longer satisfied with what passed for popular fiction. Readers wanted something more serious or more intelligent. If they wanted thrillers, they wanted more intelligent thrillers and not some moronic thing [to read].

CW: And they wanted books evaluated more seriously by people like those associated with the Booker Prize?
KI: If people are presented with a list of six writers, they could read those six or be guided by them, even if they didn't know what was happening in the literary scene. This changed the attitude of publishers and of the bookshops. They could actually invest in literary fiction. It remains the case today that a publishing house is willing to take a bet on a first novel that is out and out literary, that doesn't fit any obvious popular genre. They think, "It could get on the Booker long or short list." The long list is about thirty books. In purely business terms, this has created a different way of looking at literary fiction. And this all came at a time when there was an audience ready to grasp it. There is a large group of readers who wanted to read literary fiction, and the Booker was very important to those readers.

CW: What are some of the negative qualities of this phenomenon? Writers tailoring their works to win the Booker may compromise something, but it's always a good idea to get people to read books, right?
KI: I don't think writers actually write for the Booker. That may be an indirect phenomenon. They may say, "I want to write the kind of book that Julian Barnes writes or like V. S. Naipaul," and the shorthand view is that they may be trying to write a book to win the prize. But, it's no bad thing if people aspire to write like V. S. Naipaul of Julian Barnes. The negative effect is turning literary novelists into people who also have to be celebrities to some extent. Some people enjoy this and handle this very well, but it's hard for this not to have an effect on the writing itself. When the Prize wasn't attached to large amounts of money and large amounts of fame, it was easier for novelists to think very seriously about their work if they wanted to be literary novelists.

For young writers who are forming their literary personalities, there is tremendous pressure on them, particularly if they have reasonable success with their first book. They're very aware of sales figures and whether or not their publisher wants to continue with them. They have to put up with all the stuff that rock musicians put up with.

CW: Do you feel you have to put up with those celebrity aspects as well?
KI: I guess just the fact that I spend a large chunk of my life promoting my books is a reflection of that. I try not to let that come into what I write. The whole publishing and book-selling scene in the years since I've been publishing has changed enormously. It has swung very much into a sales-based activity. Because my books have been making the bestseller list, inevitably there is an expectation to fulfill as well.

In a way, I've had it very lucky, because I got to grow up as a writer before the commercial pressure came, because the book scene hadn't changed until around the mid 1980s.

CW: Around the time that your writing career was beginning?
KI: Around my second and third novels, there was a huge change in terms of the advances being offered and the way books were promoted. The smaller independent publishers were being bought up by corporate conglomerates. It had its positive side—there were some amateurish things going on before—it became a bit more like show business as well. People of my generation had had time to form identities, we'd time to develop, to settle and mature as writers. But I think it is difficult for young writers today who operate under these pressures. They're expected to make the bestseller list and be on the Booker Prize short list. And that is very tough. The kind of signals they get from publishers and booksellers is very mixed. They're told, "Your last book wasn't as good as the previous one in literary terms, but it was more commercial."

I had a very a serious editor when I was starting out—Robert McCrum—and Faber had not planned on selling a lot of my books. So, those pressures just weren't there for me.

CW: We've talked about expectations from publishers, booksellers, and your readers. Literary critics have another kind of concern as well. Critics noticed that in your first three novels, it was possible to group them under a theme or other literary device, such as: here are three aging protagonists who are reflecting upon their lives. As a critic, I wonder whether a similar grouping of your next three novels might be in or out of line. Would you rather critics didn't ask such a question and treat each novel as a separate and unique work?
KI: Well, no, you should feel absolutely free to group them as you will. I think this grouping game should be open to everybody. I love to group things. With films, I'm always grouping them, by themes, director, or by genre, or something. We have mini film festivals at home. I love to group books, too, to look at Shakespeare's plays and say, *Hamlet* and *Twelfth Night* belong in a category by themselves, because there's some obscure motif that ties them. It's all great fun.

CW: Your first three novels offered clear ways to group them. *The Unconsoled* was more problematic, because it was deemed as being so experimental or distinct from the first three. The next two novels returned to a realism that many readers seemed to appreciate.
KI: In the first three novels, I was rewriting the same thing. I was on the same piece of territory, and each time I was refining what I wanted to say. So, you consider the move between my second and my third novels: my second novel was an expansion of the sub-plot of my first novel, but it's about how somebody wasted his life in terms of his career. It's about well-meaning but misguided efforts to lead a good life, but it seems to happen only in the realm of one's career. It seemed to me at the end of writing that book, that if you're taking about wasted lives, you can't just talk about career, you have to talk about the personal arena as well. And so, *The Remains of the Day* is a re-write of *An Artist of the Floating World,* except it's about a man who wasted his life in his career and his personal arena. Each time, I'd think, "It's not quite there yet. I've got to do it again but with another dimension."

CW: If in fact they are the same story, you've populated each novel with idiosyncratic characters.
KI: I think audiences are used to the same story. They think they've got a thematic link when it's really the same story. Novelists, film-makers, and composers do this. They think, "Well, that's sort of like it, but let's have another go. Now that I've done this, I might be able to do this a little bit more fully." That's what was going on with my first three books, and that's why they might appear as a trilogy, but you could easily call it three attempts to say the same thing. And then, the next three books are not three attempts to say the same thing.

CW: No, they are each very distinct, very different. I'm not trying to impose an artificial connection to them, but I'm interested in the evolution of your writing and your perception of the evolution. What sorts of changes or shifts do you perceive in your writing?
KI: *The Unconsoled* is almost an era unto itself. It's a long book, and I did feel that book as a thing all by itself. I had been writing little pieces—I wouldn't call them short stories—they were just little pieces that were in that kind of mode, that dream language.

CW: The scenes in the book fit that kind of writing style: that fragmentary sense of Ryder's experiences seems to correlate to the "little pieces" of writing, perhaps? You wrote them first as these short episodes?
KI: No, no, these little pieces didn't go into the book. There were other stories that I wrote at that time that did end up in the *The Unconsoled.* I was really interested in figuring out this kind of dream writing and a "dream grammar." Actually, I was discussing this recently. This week and last week, some people have been trying to develop a stage version of *The Unconsoled* at the National Theatre Studio, workshopping it with actors. I popped in yesterday and they were trying to find an equivalent theatrical grammar to work out these things. So again, I was thinking about this dream grammar. By grammar, I mean all kinds of things. How do you get from one scene to the next? How do you get a character from one place to the next?

Instead of having conventional devices like one person expositing a lot of information, I was trying to find ways that might happen typically in a dream, where for some peculiar reason, you have an unwarranted insight into somebody's mind. Or, you witness something that you possibly couldn't have witnessed because you're three rooms away, but you see it quite clearly in your mind. Or the way people don't enter or exit rooms in the usual way, but where they suddenly end up in your consciousness. You're not aware they are sitting right next to you, but suddenly they're there.

It's a grammar that most people are familiar with, because they encounter it in dreams. So I spent a long time preparing for that book. It took me a long time to write it. Just as the first three books had been a whole adventure in one country, I felt *The Unconsoled* was an adventure in another country.

CW: It's quite an exhausting journey, then, just in terms of what Ryder does, where he goes. It would be quite tiring to lead the life that he does physically. Then there's the entire emotional dimension of his experiences, not to mention those dream-like moments.
KI: Just in pages, it's the same length as my first three books put together. It probably took me just as long, if I work out the number of hours I put into it. Time, effort, pages—I felt that I'd been with that book a long time. But, these days, I do feel like going back to that territory.

It's hard for me to see any king of grouping of my works. I can only comment on the way I write. From my working point of view, my first three books did feel like the same project and *The Unconsoled* another project. I don't know about the last two books, whether they have anything in common with the previous work or whether they are islands unto themselves.

I read a review in the [London] *Sunday Times* that suggested the last three formed a trilogy and it was called "the stress trilogy"—it was something like that.

CW: When I wrote on *When We Were Orphans* and *Never Let Me Go*, I found themes and strategies linking them in a discussion.

I am curious about any connection between *When We Were Orphans* and the film for which you wrote the screenplay, *The White Countess*. There seems to be links in terms of place, characters, and the kind of disorientation both the characters face.
KI: Before I answer that, let me say that although books come out in a certain sequence, it's not necessarily the case that the ideas came in that order. For instance, I first started to write *Never Let Me Go* in 1990, and then I gave up. I was surprised when I started to look back at my notes. In those days, it was called "The Students' Novel," and my wife thought it was a campus novel. But, it was definitely *Never Let Me Go*, with these strange young people living in the countryside, calling themselves students where there's no university. And, there's some kind of strange fate hanging over them.

CW: It didn't have the cloning element?
KI: No, there was no cloning. That was the point, you see, in 1990 I didn't have the clone stuff. I was looking for a story to do with nuclear weapons and a cold war mentality. They came across some kind of nuclear whatever and their lives were doomed. It was very embryonic. Then, it became an abandoned project. Then I wrote *The Unconsoled*, and I tried again. I did more work on what became *Never Let Me Go*, but abandoned it again, because I couldn't get any further. After *When We Were Orphans*, I finally wrote *Never Let Me Go*. It often goes like that, where things don't necessarily go in the order that you see them.

Right now, for instance, I have three, perhaps four possible projects, and I'm trying to decide which should be my next novel. I've got these four folders, and I'm putting bits of paper into each folder. At some stage I'm going to have to make up my mind.

CW: That's a very organized way of writing.
KI: Well, it looks very organized physically, but in my head it's not very organized! Sometimes, I'm reading about the American president, and sometimes I'm reading about the Anglo-Saxon Society, so I'm not quite sure which book I'm supposed to be researching. It's quite possible that I'll write all of these books at some stage and in some form. Some of these ideas are ordered as well—they date back from earlier—and so, when you assume that one book comes out of the preceding one, it's not quite that clear.

Now the main thing with *When We Were Orphans* and *The White Countess* is the Shanghai setting. But, there aren't many other things that relate the two together. The White Countess story has a completely different evolution that came out of my talks with [director] James Ivory. These were film ideas he'd had since 1992, when they [Ivory and Ismail Merchant] were making the film of *The Remains of the Day*. We discussed something that I could do a screenplay for, and Jim kept feeding me various ideas. We started trying to adapt a [Junichiro] Tanizaki novel, but that disappeared fairly rapidly. Then he was interested in making a film about a friend of his—and leaving aside the ethics of making a movie about a good friend of his without his knowledge—because Jim found aspects of his life fascinating. That ran into some difficulties, but nevertheless some elements of that idea all survived into a third idea.

I came into dinner one evening with them with my wife and said, "Let's scrap everything, and let's do a movie in Shanghai during the '30s." And

I said that because I was researching Shanghai in the 1930s for *When We Were Orphans*. There was a whole lot of research I hadn't used in the book. I had finished the novel and I'd become interested in subjects like the Russians and the Jews, and I'd not used them at all in my novel. *The White Countess* is really a mixture of this leftover research and thematic threads inherited from these previous projects that had come from James Ivory. The evolution of the story is a very collaborative process. It's one of those situations where you know you're writing for a director. I was writing for a very specific director, so there's no point in my writing stuff that he's not going to do.

The business about the main character being blind was something that was added by Jim late in the day, after the film had been cast and was ready to shoot. Many things change in movies at the last minute. In the editing stages everything changes again. You have to be careful drawing parallels between *When We Were Orphans* and *The White Countess*.

CW: So, it's a very thin thread linking those two works.
KI: Yes, I would say the link is the setting. That's where the two projects meet. The blind thing is all because Jim had lunch with a well-known writer, Ved Mehta. He's a New York Indian man who is blind and has written a number of books. Jim knows him. He had lunch with him, and then he phoned me and said, "Why don't we make the main character blind?"

I was his main ally, and Ralph Fiennes [one of the leading stars] was very keen on this. But that kind of thing is an absolute headache for the production side, because you have to change every scene. It was a very collaborative process right from the start. I was in the cutting room helping with the editing.

CW: What about the film, *The Saddest Music in the World*, which doesn't have any clear reference to any of your novels?
KI: That began in 1987. I wrote the first draft of that as the third part of a series of television dramas for Channel Four—between my first and second novels—and that was *The Saddest Music in the World*. The first two had gone reasonably well, but the third one was too big for T.V. The screenplay for the third went around various film companies, drifted around for a long time. Then, it ended up with Guy Maddin in Canada.

He lives in Winnipeg. He came across the screenplay almost by accident. He got very lit up with it, then completely rewrote it. He had never met me. Nobody had officially submitted it to him, but he had on his hands a film he

really wanted to make. He came over here and presented me with a sixty-page "treatment" in great detail. He was really charming, very eccentric, and one of the funniest guys I'd met. It was only when I saw his previous work that I was blown away. I'd never seen a filmmaker like him. At that time, he was a demi-God in the world of avant-garde filmmaking. He was very well known in that world. But, he'd never made what you'd call a mainstream film, and *The Saddest Music in the World* was going to be his entry.

It's got well known stars and it's got a storyline that you can follow. But it's very much Guy's film. My role became that of a script editor, but I kept the very essence of my story about different countries vying for [producing] the saddest music. But all these other aspects—the characters, Isabella Rossellini's glass legs—these were Guy's.

CW: Are you going to do more screenplays in the future?
KI: If there's an idea that would make a really great movie.

CW: I'd like to talk with you about your sixth novel, *Never Let Me Go*. The song by Judy Bridgewater of the same title, is this a real source?
KI: It's fictional. After *When We Were Orphans*, I was thinking of writing a novel about musicians in the pre-rock-and-roll period and a song from that particular era, "Never Let Me Go," worked itself into my book. I liked those words, and it helped evoke that era of the world I was interested in. But then I got side-tracked and went back to writing the Students' Novel I'd been working on all those years. And, the title from the other project felt right for this one, the Students' one. This time, I could see a way forward with this much-abandoned project.

CW: Did something click? Was is the clone business?
KI: Yes, it was the final dimension that helped the story to come alive. Around that time, in 2001, there was a lot of stuff about cloning, about stem-cell research, about Dolly the sheep. It was very much in the air. I remember one morning listening to a debate on the radio about this, and I thought, "If I forget about this nuclear power dooming the students, and if I try and go down this road, if I thought of these people as clones, what would it do to these people?" I could contrive a situation for them. I could see a metaphor here. I was looking for a situation to talk about the whole aging process, but in such an odd way that we'd have to look at it all in a new way.

CW: You touched on the aging issue by having these relatively young people envision their deaths, but it's also possible to look at their problems as similar to those facing terminal patients. It was about the helplessness of knowing you were going to die. In the book, the characters could be fine after their first donation, even the second, but death was still there in the not-so-distant future. That made the subject so terrible to confront. Of course, when one is aging, the body undergoes a different kind of debilitation, and so as a metaphor for how people think about what little time is left, the book was quite far-reaching.
KI: Of course it's not literally about the aging process. It's not about old age, because the characters stay young. It was a way of exploring certain aspects—psychologically for instance—of what happens as you leave childhood, face up to adulthood, and then face up to your mortality.

CW: As in death of childhood, of adolescence, of adulthood? So, it's not physical deaths, but metaphorical deaths at those stages?
KI: Well, I guess you can look at it that way, but I don't think of the stages as deaths particularly. In the book, I wasn't aware of any great mourning as they passed from one thing to another. The death is what awaits them, but by contriving a situation where a group of people had a life span of thirty-plus years—as opposed to a longer span if people are lucky—I thought I could discuss certain aspects of facing death. I didn't want them to worry about how to escape. I wanted their concerns to be more or less the same ones that all people had. What are the things important to us while we are here? How do we fit things like love, work, and friendship into what is a surprisingly short period of time?

CW: Despite the brevity of their lives, you don't force intensity upon their situations. It was exactly the quality of ordinariness about those life situations—of coping with friendship or love or creativity—that made their abbreviated lives seem so harrowing to a reader. There were a few times when the characters sought alternatives, such as when Ruth tries to find her possible. Much later in the book Kathy says to Ruth that she might have escaped, but could Ruth really have done that?

It was the everyday, ordinary events that made the story so sad. We wonder whether we might have made different decisions if we knew exactly how much longer we had to live. But, we don't know those things, and no matter what age we are, that period between life now and when we die, or "complete," is unknowable. They had inherently accepted the terms of their lives.
KI: I was always trying to find a metaphor for something very simple—it sounds rather grand—but, a metaphor for the human condition, and for coming to terms with the fact that we're not immortal, that we're here for a limited time. There is a countdown. By creating a situation where to us—the readers and me the writer—their lives seem cruelly truncated, inside their world, that's what's normal. I thought by creating that kind of situation for them, we could get a perspective on our situation, where we hope to live to eighty if something doesn't strike us down. These people operate in the same way. They've been given this fate and they accept it. There is a cruelty about it, but they don't see it to the same extent.

CW: I think there's a hint of that towards the end where the characters understand that when you are a clone, you become a donor, and you ally yourself with what that means. The rest you close off. There's a large section of the book where Kathy begins to feel she's no longer a part of a community, because everybody she once knew is dying or dead. And she will go there, too, in a few months and complete this route. Meanwhile, there is emptiness and sadness.
KI: I wanted her to be somebody who felt she wasn't acting her age. All of her peers had gone on to the next stage and she was lingering.

CW: She's had her donations deferred for some reason, so she's outside of her peer group for a time. But because she's given this period of time, she is able to tell their stories.
KI: I wanted the sense that it was comfortable for her to resign herself to what everybody else had done already. That it feels normal to her, that it's her duty. I was much more interested in the extent to which we accepted our fates, the kind of lives we were allowed to live as people, rather than focus on the rebellious spirit we gain and try to move out of our lives. I think this is predominantly what takes place in the world, that people take the life they feel they've been handed. They try their best to make it good. They don't really try to go outside of that. They say with varying degrees, "This is my life. I'm going to do the best with what I've been given. I will try to gain dignity and worth, to try and conduct my relationships with the people who are important to me in the right way. If I make mistakes because I'm only human, maybe I can put them right before it's too late."

I think most people live in that kind of a world. Nothing is a perfect metaphor for the human condition. This is just one metaphor for one aspect of how people are. The strategy here is that we're looking at a very strange world, at a very strange group of people, and gradually, I wanted people to feel they're not looking at such a strange world, that this is everybody's story.

CW: In all of your other novels, a reader can find very concrete metaphors to work with. With *When We Were Orphans*, there is the metaphor of orphans—what happened when parents or guardians aren't really what they seem to be? *Never Let Me Go* seemed to be a very literal novel. You have, for instance, the trash metaphor. You really mean trash as in rubbish, junk—the students are going to sales and buying garbage. Ruth talks about trash when she points out that the "possible" that she's chasing is not the person from whom she was cloned, that instead, they all must have been fashioned out of the lowest order of humans. At the very end, Kathy is hoping to see a vast empty land, but she sees all this rubbish. You have very literal things that can be taken to metaphorical levels—you use terms such as "possibles," "futures," "completion,"—these literally describe the situation.
KI: Yes I guess so. Do you think this is more literal than how metaphors in my books worked before?

CW: This book seems distinct. But of course, you also use terms such as "service," "work," and "duty" in other novels.
KI: Well, the butler [in *The Remains of the Day*] was a metaphor for political power.

CW: In *Never Let Me Go*, these literal donors are never let go, in fact. They continue to exist in people to whom they've donated, whom they don't know. They live on in this macabre way after they've departed. I'm not suggesting that this book is not metaphorical, but your use of choice terms struck me as unique or distinct from your other works. As we talk, though, I see perhaps the approach here to metaphors might not be that dissimilar.
KI: I hadn't intended any huge metaphor to emerge out of the word "trash," for instance, when the students are at the sale. There wasn't supposed to be any powerful metaphorical dimension there. The overall story is of the clones and the fact that they give up their organs one by one, and they die. They think about why they've been educated and what's important in their lives.

That's all a metaphor for what we all do in the real world. Indeed, the same fate awaits us. I don't think *Never Let Me Go* is a book that operates step by step in little metaphors. I don't think readers have to be aware of metaphorical dimensions in every detail.

CW: Objects are really those objects and they have a tangible place in the story. Kathy's song, "Never Let Me Go," is something that is literally taken away, stolen from her collection.
KI: I like metaphors that don't have to be deciphered; I like metaphors that are just felt by the reader. Perhaps the reader doesn't even realize it's a metaphor, but it works on the reader's emotions as they feel a resonance to something in their real lives.

A lot of popular Hollywood films often do this: they bypass the viewer intellectually and they make themselves popular by appealing to something in their lives. People are afraid of street crime, for instance, so you make a movie about some tough cop who is going to go outside of the usual parameters of the law and blow away the bad guys. There are these scenes where the audience gets very worked up, and they're responding metaphorically to some extent. They're applying those situations to ones that they face, whether it's a film that's a romantic comedy or about being frustrated in your job.

I like people to feel emotionally the resonance of the metaphor. It's fine if they identify and analyze the metaphor, but it's also fine if they don't and just respond to the absurd story about clones. Really, it may be foolish to get all worked up emotionally about a bunch of clones, but when readers do respond emotionally, it's because they feel something exists that is real to their situation. I don't like metaphors where people have to stop, to circle around, and then puzzle it out.

CW: Because there were such literal terms used to describe the situations in *Never Let Me Go*, readers could in fact read it as a direct, if strange, story, to which they might or might not respond emotionally.

I was curious about the childhood element. You had focused on aspects of childhood in *When We Were Orphans*. In *Never Let Me Go*, at the very end of the book, Miss Emily tells Tommy and Kathy in this revelatory scene—in the scene that will explain and tie up all the loose ends—that "we sheltered you during those years, and we gave you your childhoods." The students find that the "gallery" does not exist and they learn why the guardians encouraged

their artwork in spite of this non-existing gallery. What should we make of the wrenching of childhood innocence from that scene?

KI: That scene that you're referring to with Miss Emily is where we're presented with an idea that in order to have a proper childhood, an element of deception must be used. If they had known they would die in the way they do, would they have embraced this arts education? They might say, "What's the point? Why are we making all this effort?" I don't mean just in arts, but in their relationships. Would we make any effort to be decent human beings? I think that's the main point raised in this scene. Miss Emily is saying, "As far as I'm concerned, it's worth it, even if it all ends up in dust." To make this childhood work, you have to deceive them into believing it's all worthwhile.

As parents, we put an enormous amount of energy into protecting our children, getting them optimistic and confident, and getting them to think hard not just about their schoolwork but about the emotional labyrinth of getting along with their peers and their elders. Maybe you can only do that effectively by slightly lying to the child.

CW: I was talking to my daughter about why I had to go into work each day—not only because I like my work, but because the work pays for the things we need and enjoy. She understands that I'm useful in that way, and she asked me, "What am I good for? What am I useful for?" It struck me that this was one important point of your sixth novel, though the answer there was more morbid. The students were useful because they will become organ donors. I saw that there could be pragmatic but also astonishing ways to address this question about what "use" humans had for themselves and one another.

KI: The question, "What are we useful for?" is the question that your daughter Grace asks and one that Tommy and Kathy ask in the book. Some cold system says to Tommy and Kathy that they will be useful as organ donors, and it's the same as another system saying to Grace that someday she will be useful to the world economy. That is one sort of answer. But, that wouldn't be the right answer for Tommy or Kathy. Why did a place like Hailsham give them the childhood they did? Why not just physically grow up?

CW: In that fictional world that's where it all leads to, toward organ donation. There are other clones in different schools that really do just grow up physically to be useful donors and they don't get the arts education.

KI: The teachers at Hailsham did have an ulterior motive. They deceive the students, but they gave them something better, not to be better donors, but to be better humans. All these other things—learning how to love and to conduct good friendships, as well as learning how to read and write at a higher not just functional level—maybe these things are valuable. The quality of lives is better, because of these kinds of education. In order to persuade people to make the effort to learn and actually face what is often a difficult and complicated procedure—how to conduct human relationships and not mind getting hurt and upset—we have to be tricked to think there is a payoff.

CW: The deception is a necessary illusion so that we might have what a colleague of mine calls "creative entrepreneurship." We may have parents or guardians who have those wishes for their children, but there may be psychological or emotional detours that occur. We learn that knowledge about these processes can be dangerous or harmful, that this "necessary illusion" may be better left unknown. Miss Lucy tries to let the students know early on the nature of their lives, but she is silenced by the higher ups.

KI: I'm not fully on Miss Emily's side or Miss Lucy's side. If a guardian like Miss Lucy had spilt the beans very early, undoubtedly the children would have been less happy. The protected few years would have vanished and possibly, they would not have become as good human beings as they eventually do. They might have become selfish and just despairing. Perhaps they wouldn't have the investment in their futures that would have been necessary to make the effort.

CW: Ruth's main energy had been in keeping Tommy and Kathy apart, a confession she makes at the end of her life. Is she a model of the improvement of character that you suggest?

KI: She's not very good in context, but she's human. Usually, my characters are more negative than this. These three main characters are much better people–even Ruth, who has the most obvious flaws. I wanted to show that when her time is up, the things that had been important are not about material possessions or about being remembered in a particular way. Her instincts in the end are to do the decent thing. I wanted a sense at the end of the book that what's really important in life comes down to the people that they love and to wonder about whether these people had been treated decently. Memories, especially about childhood, become the precious things. It's not really their careers they care about.

Although it's a story about mortality, I wanted it to be a quite positive story. By having this rather negative, bleak scenario, I thought it might highlight what is actually quite positive and valuable about being alive.

CW: It's a very sorrowful tale.
KI: For me, this is a rather cheerful tale. My other books are about these quite flawed individuals, and this is about a bleak fantasy world, but apart from the bad news—which is news that we already know about how we will all die someday—the book really stresses the positive side of human nature. Humans are capable of caring deeply for one another, even though they make mistakes, because they are prey to human emotions such as jealousy, possessiveness, or anger. Ultimately, they are capable of being very decent. It was a kind of a celebration, which could be seen in this bleak backdrop.

CW: At the end, Kathy is supposed to be somewhere and she will figure it out. Still, I have to re-think "cheerfulness" in the context of your remarks and my own reading, because the book offers a rather sobering view of life.
KI: There is an inevitable sadness, because she's lost everything and everyone. On the other hand, it's not a bleak view of human nature.

Index